

**TITLE:** Transforming Central Office Practices for Equity, Coherence, and Continuous Improvement: Chicago Public Schools Under the Leadership of Dr. Janice K. Jackson

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**ABSTRACT:**

This study investigates the leadership practices associated with, impacts of, and challenges encountered from a “big city” Chief Executive Officer’s continuous improvement approach to system-level leadership. Undertaken from Summer 2019 to early Fall 2020, this study used organizational learning and continuous improvement as tools to conceptually frame this study.



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Transforming Central Office Practices  
for Equity, Coherence, and  
Continuous Improvement: Chicago  
Public Schools under the Leadership  
of Dr. Janice K. Jackson

Samuel P. Whalen PhD

December 15, 2020

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Table of Contents</b>	1.
<b>Table of Exhibits</b>	3.
<b>Abbreviations and Acronymns</b>	5.
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	7.
<b>Introduction</b>	8.
<b>Complexity, Coherence, and Adaptivity in Large District Leadership</b>	11.
Setting Foundational Direction.	12.
Converging on the Core Technology of Instruction	12.
Coherence as a Dynamic Process and Practice	13.
Learning to Improve and the Practice of Coherence-Making.	13.
Adaptive Leadership and Coherence within Complexity	14.
<b>The CEo Period: From Crisis Management to a Foundation for District Coherence</b>	15.
<b>Coherence as a Response to Institutional Crisis: Reasserting the CEo Role</b>	16.
Developing a CEo Entry Plan.	17.
Managing Up: Negotiating a Scope of Authority	18.
Establishing a Capable CEo Team.	19.
Enlisting Central Office Leaders: Reframing “the Re-Org” as Coherence-Making	19.
Reshaping School Communications.	20.
<b>Building a Learning Agenda for Academic Coherence from the CEo Platform</b>	21.
Active Listening with Teachers and School Administrators	21.
Concerted Outreach and Engagement with School Principals	22.
Performance Management Phase I: Pivoting PM toward Continuous Strategic Improvement.	24.
Visioning as a Leadership Process: Consultation, Codification & Enculturation.	28.
Cultivating Reciprocal Accountability Among Senior Central Office Leaders	31.
Performance Management Phase II: Building an Infrastructure for Continuous Improvement	32.
Building Instructional Coherence at the Middle Level of School Supervision	36.

<b>Summarizing the CEdO Period – Founding an Institutional Transformation</b>	41.
<b>The Transition to CEO: Scaling Continuous Improvement Across the Organization</b>	43.
Engaging Strategically and Tactically	43.
Establishing a Cadence of Leadership Development: Structures, Routines & Expert Help	46.
<b>Advancing the Organization’s “North Stars”: Continuous Improvement, Customer Service, and Equity</b>	49.
Continuous Improvement (CI)	50.
Customer Service	55.
Bringing Equity to the Forefront of District Vision	57.
<b>Enacting Convergence: Vision Collaboratives and the Curriculum Equity Initiative (CEI)</b>	62.
Vision Collaboratives	62.
The Curriculum Equity Initiative	64.
<b>What Have We Learned? Reprising our Research Questions</b>	67.
<b>Conclusion</b>	83.
<b>References</b>	85.

## Table of Exhibits

<b>Page</b>	<b>Exhibit</b>	<b>Brief Description</b>
17	Exhibit 1	Chief Education Officer (CEdO) Proposed Entry Plan, Summer 2015
26	Exhibit 2	OCLG Collaboration Continuum; CPS PM Training Module 1_July 2018
26	Exhibit 3	CPS Performance Management Presentation - March 2016
26	Exhibit 4	CPS PM Department Strategic Plan – SY 2016 Template
29	Exhibit 5	CPS “Success Starts Here” Three-Year Vision (7 Page Version)
29	Exhibit 6	CPS “Success Starts Here” Three-Year Vision (Full Version; April 2017)
33	Exhibit 7	Data Inquiry Root Cause Analysis Template, Summer 2016
34	Exhibit 8	CPS PM Department Strategic Plan – Template v2, Fall 2016
36	Exhibit 9	CPS/CEdO Performance Management Report Spring 2017
38	Exhibit 10	Office of Network Support PM Strategic Plan, Spring 2016
38	Exhibit 11	CPS/CEdO High School Strategy Overview, June 2016
39	Exhibit 12	CPS/CEdO Instructional Core Walk Protocol, Fall 2017
39	Exhibit 13	CPS Instructional Core Walk CEdO Feedback, Fall 2017
40	Exhibit 14	Office of Network Support Strategic Plan, Spring 2017
40	Exhibit 15	Office of Network Support Strategic Plan May 2018
41	Exhibit 16	Network Chief Deputy Panel Interview Round 1 Protocol
41	Exhibit 17	Network Chief/Deputy Interview Protocol, 2017
44	Exhibit 18	CEO Proposed Entry Plan December 2017
46	Exhibit 19	Senior Leadership Team CI Presentation Deck, December 2019
50,51	Exhibit 20	CPS Continuous Improvement Optimization, July 2018
51	Exhibit 21	Continuous Improvement Overview, April 2018
51	Exhibit 22	CI Department Strategic Plan Template, SY19
51	Exhibit 23	End of Year (EOY) CI: Start, Stop, Improve Protocol
51	Exhibit 24	Continuous Improvement Schedule_Academic Departments_Fall 2018
51	Exhibit 25	CI Launch Training Module (Introduction), July 2018
51	Exhibit 26	Operations Departments CI Development Plan, Spring 2018
51	Exhibit 27	Senior Leadership Team Meeting, Fishbowl Protocol, July 2018
51	Exhibit 28	Continuous Improvement Strategic Plan Review Template, SY 2018
52	Exhibit 29	Continuous Improvement Expansion Plan, June 2018
53	Exhibit 30	Continuous Improvement Platform Requirements, August 2019
54	Exhibit 31	SY20 High School Collaborative Strategic Plan Template
56	Exhibit 32	"CPS is Service" Presentation, February 2018
56	Exhibit 33	"CPS is Service" Training Worksheet, Fall 2018
58	Exhibit 34	CPS Equity Report Handouts, July 2018
58	Exhibit 35	CPS Equity Framework, August 2020
60	Exhibit 36	Five-Year Vision, March 2019
63	Exhibit 37	Vision Collaborative Implementation Presentation, September 2019

<b>Page</b>	<b>Exhibit</b>	<b>Brief Description</b>
65	Exhibit 38	Curriculum Equity Initiative Public Presentation, May 2019
65,66	Exhibit 39	Curriculum Equity Initiative Skyline Production Process, November 2019
79	Exhibit 40	Vision Progress Report, September 2020

## Abbreviations and Acronyms

5Es	University of Chicago's Five Essential Supports framework
20 for 20	2016 Campaign to Address Disparity in State Funding
ACT	American College Testing
ALT	Academic Leadership Team
ARA	Annual Regional Analysis
AREL	G.W. Bush's Alliance to Reform Education Leadership
CART	Courteous, Accurate, Respectful, Timely
CC	Collaboration Continuum
CCC	Chicago City Colleges
CCSR	University of Chicago Consortium for School Research
CCSS	Common Core State Standards
CCSSO	Council of Chief state School Officers
CEdO	Chief Education Officer
CEI	Curriculum Equity Initiative
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CFF	Children's First Fund
CI	Continuous Improvement
CIA	Curricular Rigor, Instructional Approaches, Assessment Strategies
CIDL	Department of Curriculum, Instruction & Digital Learning
CIWP	Continuous Improvement Work Plan
COO	Chief Operations Officer
CPS	Chicago Public Schools
CTU	Chicago Teachers Union
CUEL	Center for Urban Education Leadership
DI	Data Inquiry
EC	Executive Cabinet
ECCC	Early Career and College Credentials
ELT	Executive Leadership Team
EOY	End of Year
ERA	Enterprise Risk Assessment
FACE	Family and Community Engagement
GoCPS	CEO initiative to address issues of equity and excellence
IB	International Baccalaureate
ICW	Instructional Core Walk
I & I	Innovation and Incubation
ISLs	Instructional Support Leaders
ITS	Information and Technology Services
KPI	Key Progress Indicators
LAM	Libraries, Archives, and Museums
LSCs	Local School Councils
MTSS	Multi-Tiered Systems of Support
NCs	Network Chiefs
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
NWEA	Northwest Evaluation Association
NWU	Northwestern University
OCLC	Open Content Library Cooperative
OLCE	Office of Language and Cultural Education
ONS	Office of Network Support
PD	Professional Development

PL	Professional Learning
PLC	Professional Learning Community
PM	Performance Management
PSAT	Pre-Scholastic Aptitude Test
Q & A	Question and Answer
RCA	Root Cause Analysis
REACH	Recognizing Educators Advancing Chicago's Students (CPS Teacher Evaluation Framework)
RQ	Research Question
SAT	Scholastic Aptitude Test
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
SQM	School Quality Management
SQMR	School Quality Management and Research
SQRP	School Quality Rating Policy
SME	Subject Matter Experts
SPED	Special Education
SRT	Structures, Routines, and Tools
SSC	School Support Center
SY	School Year
TAC	Teacher Advisory Council
T & L	Teaching and Learning
TRU	Teaching for Robust Understanding
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UIC	University of Illinois at Chicago
VC	Vision Collaboratives



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*“Although the notion of inspiration may appear flowery to some, it has an impact on the professional culture at Baldwin. The work of both principals in creating a transparent professional learning community focused on continuous improvement, fostered an environment where the talents of good teachers were espoused, and helped other teachers solve problems of practice. At both schools, teachers saw their colleagues as both a resource and a source of healthy competition.”*

*Dr. Janice K. Jackson, CPS High School Principal, UIC Doctoral Dissertation, 2010*

## **Introduction**

In the spring of 2018, Bridget Lee was well into the first year of a new and exciting job at the Chicago Public Schools. As the Manager of Performance Policy in the district’s Department of School Quality Management and Research (SQMR), Bridget played several key roles in translating CEO Janice Jackson’s ambitious vision for system wide alignment to meeting student needs into daily practices of cross-functional continuous improvement (CI), equity, and customer service. She and her team of analysts huddled daily to solve wicked problems of data management and access that easily hamper the ability of departments to monitor their performance progress. They met frequently with department leaders from across the organization to help them translate their strategic aspirations into measurable goals and think through problems of data quality and availability. She had been assigned primary responsibility for a significant revamp of the district’s signature - and in many quarters controversial - School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP) and data system. And she represented her department in cross-department convenings such as the recent planning sessions for the CEO’s second and expanded vision statement, “Success Starts Here,” contributing substantively to discussions of district-wide goal setting, performance benchmarking, and data quality. At every level, Bridget felt challenged to excel by an organization whose commitment to transforming ways of work in order to alter the odds for student success came daily from the very top. “I just feel like this is a really incredible time to be in this city and in this district...there are a lot of really, really brilliant people here...they see the future, they can see it so clearly and are willing to dig in and work...Like people want to break down silos. They want to work together. That is not something that I’ve had to convince people is important.”

So when one of Bridget’s brightest analysts alerted her that spring to a duplicate set of data requests from three different departments, she immediately saw a more fundamental issue than mere inefficiency or redundancy. These departments, each with responsibility for three distinct early college credential programs (i.e., Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and a home-grown Bi-Lingual Certification program), were requesting identical student rosters for the same schools for recruitment purposes. Bridget knew that each department would ask school staff to advertise their respective programs to all students and parents on those rosters, duplicating school effort and effectively competing with each other for enrollees. But these programs were in theory allied in a broader district effort to more equitably expand student access to “early career and college credentials” (ECCC) - a strategic priority in the district’s three-year vision. It became clear to Bridget that while ECCC was an aspirational construct for several departments, it in fact only existed annually as a high school performance metric assembled by her SQMR analysts. The ECCC departments themselves were minimally aware of each other’s programmatic aims and conflicting strategies. As Bridget observed, “I realized this is a symptom of these people don’t know each other. They don’t know they’re trying to do the same stuff in the same schools.”

In terms of organizational coherence, this revealed a problem in “convergence,” the district’s shared aspirational term for breaking down old silos and thinking above department and program boundaries to expand student access to resources like pre-college credentials. For Bridget, the situation called for an injection of leadership to convene the implicated departments from her perch as data and policy manager, and leverage a broader conversation about how to structure ECCC as a genuine collaborative reality.

While she knew that convening department heads was “technically not my job,” she proceeded with confidence that her superiors would also recognize the opportunity to build a more robust, data-informed strategy to advance the ECCC vision. With their support, she built political will among key senior stakeholders for an inter-departmental working group about ECCC, and designed a pilot data framework for viewing ECCC more clearly as an actionable strategic priority. Two years later this pilot working group continues regular meetings with substantive evidence of impact on strategies to target students traditionally not included in college credentialing strategies. It also helped lay the internal CPS groundwork for an innovative partnership with Chicago City Colleges (CCC) to bolster strong post-secondary pathways for every CPS high school graduate. And it became a model for a next generation structure for cross-departmental strategic working groups - “Vision Collaboratives” - which Bridget now coordinates in her new role as a Senior Manager within the Office of the Chief Executive Officer.

While this anecdote of “leadership from the middle” may have produced an exceptional outcome, it is by no means an outlier or anomaly. Instead it is fairly typical of an invitation to leadership that has steadily taken root in the central office of the Chicago Public Schools over a five-year period starting in 2015. It is an invitation that comes from the very top of the organization, from a team of young but seasoned district leaders who have taught and led at every level of the system, learned craft in the crucible of Chicago’s accountability-driven principalship, and challenged their thinking in some of the country’s leading school leadership preparation programs. And it is a culture grounded in norms, structures and routines of continuous improvement that frame daily opportunities for influence and initiative at every level of the organization. The rise of Janice Jackson and her senior team is in some respects remarkable and a story worth telling. But their experience is also representative of a national cadre of urban leaders who are arguably the best prepared generation of educators to ascend to district leadership in the nation’s history. As a cadre they are beneficiaries both of an expanded knowledge base around instructional leadership and learning-focused management, as well as a range of leadership supports not available to prior generations of system leaders. But the roadmap from theory to actual district leadership practice remains at best a sketchy one. How these new leaders learn to apply this knowledge and experience in tackling challenges of urban education at scale is thus a question of considerable importance for the nation’s districts and schools.

In this case study we explore the transformational agenda of one such emerging district leader, Janice Jackson, CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, along with the central office leadership team she assembled over a five-year period. In July 2015 Dr. Jackson was tapped by then-Mayor Rahm Emanuel to become Chief Education Officer (CEdO) in partnership with CEO Forrest Claypool, a veteran public “turn-around” administrator. Their appointments came on the heels of three tumultuous years of discord over school closings, labor unrest, fiscal turbulence, leadership scandal, and persistent inequities in student outcomes and school conditions by income and zip code. In prior encounters Dr. Jackson had impressed Mayor Emanuel as a straight-shooter who spoke her mind, had risen from teacher to school founder to Network Chief with distinction, and possessed an acute grasp of the district’s specific instructional and structural challenges. While Mr. Claypool was selected to “right-size” the organization’s budget, Dr. Jackson was granted wide latitude - within some severe fiscal constraints - to advance a renewed vision for CPS and back up that vision with a re-culturing and re-tooling of the academic side of central office. Rising to the CEO role in December 2017, and with less budgetary pressure, she expanded the same equity-focused agenda of customer support and strategic planning to the “operations” side of CPS central office, and began leveraging technology and professional learning to align specific school needs to central office resources more powerfully. In doing so, she and her team aspired to create a human and technical infrastructure for ambitious district-wide innovations that would be grounded in robust processes of continuous improvement, prove adaptable across Chicago’s diverse communities, and be sustainable where the “biggest bets” of prior administrations had often faltered.

We see three features of Dr. Jackson’s leadership and the program of district revitalization in Chicago that recommend themselves for case study. First, Dr. Jackson’s career trajectory exemplifies the more intentional development of instructional leadership now taking root in large urban districts around the country. This matrix of supports includes the adoption of more rigorous standards for principal training and certification at the state level; significant re-designs of traditional school administrator training programs both inside and outside university settings around principles of selectivity and ambitious adult learning; more rigorous standards for principal promotion encoded in highly selective district screening and selection processes; and revamped cohort programs for professional learning and superintendent endorsement modeled on cutting-edge models of executive education. In Dr. Jackson’s case, her career path includes doctoral training in a redesigned, nationally recognized and selective university training program. The program’s signature features link instructional theory closely to practice through on-the-job coaching, cohort supports, and the development of a learner’s stance toward one’s leadership practice through on-going reflective exercises and the completion of a data-driven dissertation. Relationships with coaches and mentors from this doctoral experience, paired with post-doctoral executive formation experiences in programs like Chiefs for Change<sup>1</sup> and the Nonprofit Executive Education Program at Northwestern University<sup>2</sup>, have remained key resources at every step of her rise through CPS.

Second, Dr. Jackson’s program for district reform is deeply informed by a maturing research literature linking school-level instructional leadership to district-wide equity reform and continuous improvement. In line with the thinking of Kenneth Leithwood, for example, Dr. Jackson views the challenge of disrupting systemic inequities and achievement gaps as one of integrating a compelling **vision** for change with **systems** for managing continuous improvement processes and a program of professional **learning** keyed to expertise and leadership development (Leithwood & McCullough, 2016). Consistent with themes of **internal coherence**, Dr. Jackson grapples with the challenge of re-aligning central office mindsets and ways of working to the daily needs of schools as the necessary groundwork for forging a coordinated and agile system of supports for schools, students, and families (Elmore; 2004; Honig, 2013; Johnson et al., 2015; Cobb et al., 2018). And the cultivation of leadership practices around **relational trust, reciprocal accountability, and distributed leadership** are prominent features of her engagement with colleagues and staff (Bryk & Schneider, 2004; Elmore, 2004; Lee, Seashore Louis, & Anderson, 2012). Thus Dr. Jackson’s tenure at CPS affords an unusual opportunity to track how a leader deeply steeped in the theory and practice of school-level instructional leadership has adapted and made sense of those same concepts and guidance as they apply to district-wide instructional reform.

Third, CPS as a system and the City of Chicago as a context admirably situate the efforts of Dr. Jackson and her colleagues within the full complexity of contemporary American urban education. The district itself represents one of the oldest and most fully realized “portfolio strategies” in the United States, interweaving structures and pathways for parent-school choice with pupil-based funding, degrees of principal autonomy, performance-based accountability, and a wide range of external partner relationships (Lake & Hill, 2009; Lake, 2018). Combine this complex web of centralized and decentralized system elements with mayoral control, limited but substantive Local School Councils (LSCs), and a contentious union relationship, and the political challenges to sustaining internal coherence between central office and local schools are continual and daunting for a system CEO (Johnson et al., 2015; Todd-Breland, 2018).

Chicago also presents some of the highest levels of demographic churn, socio-economic disparity, and social pathology of any American city of the last decade (Sampson, 2012; Stoval, 2013; Henricks et al., 2018). These conditions translate into highly stressful work and learning environments in hundreds of Chicago’s inner city schools, yielding high rates of teacher and principal turnover, and straining district resources to address school-level challenges adaptively. At the same time, Dr. Jackson has demonstrated

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://chiefsforchange.org/>

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://www.kellogg.northwestern.edu/executive-education/take-action/contact-nonprofit.aspx>.

considerable political acumen in navigating these challenges, grounded in part in her management of change strategies with strong emphasis on public input and transparency. As a case of strategic adaptation of new knowledge to new leadership challenges, then, Dr. Jackson's tenure at CPS can shed considerable light on these six research questions:

RQ1. What were the origins and progenitors of the approach to institutional revitalization that the CEO and her team designed and enacted from mid-2015 through the start of 2020? How did she combine varied influences into a coherent change management strategy?

RQ2. What structures, routines, and tools (or, SRT) were developed to enact the CEO's vision for continuous improvement and district transformation, and in particular, the enactment of continuous improvement processes? How were these SRT adapted and improved over time?

RQ3. What contextual factors, internal and external to CPS, were affordances for the realization of the CEO's vision and strategic initiatives? What contextual factors challenged, constrained, or obstructed these initiatives?

RQ4. How and how well did central office improvement strategies align to a vision, strategies, and toolsets for continuous improvement at the Network and school levels? How far did alignment progress, and what challenges to such alignment emerged?

RQ5. Over time, what were the most prominent successes and impacts of the CEO's institutional revitalization program on the culture and capacity of the district? Did these advances translate to measurable gains in key metrics of professional capacity and student success?

RQ6. What leadership lessons did the CEO draw from her efforts to shift institutional culture and capacity toward continuous improvement practices?

Before beginning, a brief note about the methods and circumstances of the study. We employed a qualitative research design in which individual and group interviews, artifact analysis, and observation of meetings and convenings of varying scope and scale were the primary means of data collection. We conducted seven interviews with Dr. Jackson between April 2017 and June 2020 - three in her capacity as CEdO, and four after December 2017 in her capacity as CEO, totaling about 9.5 interview hours. The remaining 37 interviews with 40 central office key informants produced about 65 interview hours. The majority of these interviews were with central office informants at the department head level or higher, with a secondary representation from staff at the project manager and analyst level. We logged over 20 hours of observations of central office meetings and public district events, and assembled a deep library of public and central office work documents and protocols. Throughout this data collection we benefited from the cooperation of CEO Office staff who opened meeting venues and shared documents and other artifacts with minimal restrictions.

While there are in theory no "ideal" conditions for conducting a case study of change processes in a large urban American school district, the prospect for reasonably stable political and organizational conditions did seem promising at the outset of the primary study year in summer 2019. In fact, the 2019-2020 school year (SY) turned out to be among the most tumultuous and unprecedented in recent CPS history. In addition to the Covid-19 pandemic, which disrupted classroom instruction across the nation, SY 2020 included a contentious teacher strike in fall 2019, and continued fallout from two serious institutional scandals linked to special education services and the reporting of sexual abuse. These circumstances yielded many opportunities to witness Dr. Jackson's capacity for adaptive leadership in action. But they also did disrupt some of the projected planning and development work in one of the case study's primary areas of focus, the development of the district's continuous improvement practices. That said, the

turbulence of the study year revealed much about how concerted momentum toward internal district coherence can be maintained and advanced even under the most fraught of external circumstances.

### **Complexity, Coherence, and Adaptivity in Large District Leadership**

It is a ubiquitous observation among those who study large school districts that they are complex and “messy” to lead, perhaps more so than most private or public sector organizations (Fullan, 2003; Archibald, 2016; Cobb et al., 2018). For example, they are often tasked by diverse stakeholders with “multiple and diffuse goals” that address not only the academic learning of students, but also elements of emotional regulation, character development, “soft skills” valued by future employers, and the transmission of cultural and political values (Archibald, 2016). They are unusually “open systems with porous boundaries,” meaning that they are not clearly demarcated from their surrounding environment, but rather structured in ways that authorize several constituencies to influence policies and decision-making processes. Their governance is often contested by entities at all governmental levels, challenging district and principals to “craft coherence” as best they can across competing policy agendas (Honig and Hatch, 2004). And both the methods and outputs of educational “production” are more uncertain than in industry, involving the development of common understandings about the intellectual growth of children as well as how best to organize instruction toward that growth in group settings. Both sets of questions include psychological, social, ethical and political dimensions which contribute to the challenge of an “uncertain knowledge base” for educational practice (Hiebert & Stigler, 2002; Bryk et al., 2015).

In response to this pervasive multi-leveled complexity and turbulence, a significant research consensus has emerged around the leadership challenges entailed in organizing, aligning, focusing and mobilizing a district’s disparate resources and energy to support the district’s core mission more powerfully (Knapp et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2015; Cobb et al., 2018). The research literature of *coherence* as applied to large school districts is extensive, offering several insights that can help us better hear, situate and understand Dr. Jackson’s specific efforts to apply current knowledge to district revitalization in the Chicago context. For this study key insights include:

***Setting Foundational Direction.*** With so many potential and de facto goals and interests in play, leadership for coherence must name, clarify, and prioritize a focal set of values and objectives so that members of the organization understand *deeply* what to concentrate their daily work around (Curtis & City, 2009; Leithwood & McCullough, 2016; Fullan & Quinn, 2015). Well beyond promulgating paper-only vision statements, leaders in districts achieving higher synergy for equity and excellence attend to practices that translate seminal ideas and moral purpose into a compelling culture of participation in advancing district goals - that is, how district stakeholders *experience meaning* in their work and roles (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 119). As Leithwood & McCullough (2016) summarize it, these practices include soliciting broad input into how goals are fashioned; clearly modeling shared values in public actions; clearly communicating the correspondence of envisioned values and signature initiatives; and training leadership at all district levels to explain the vision and illustrate how it animates district initiatives, frequently and skillfully (p. 28).

***Converging on the Core Technology of Instruction.*** In the era of standards-based reform, two primary values and goals have catalyzed efforts toward greater coordination and synergy - the improvement of learning outcomes for all students, and the reduction of outcome inequities linked to ascribed characteristics such as gender, race, and class (Newmann et al., 2001; Hubbard, Mehan & Stein, 2006; Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Rigorous commitment to these tandem goals of equity and excellence, in turn, implies concentrated attention at every system level to the quality and potency of the *instructional core*, that is, the range of settings, times, and modes of interaction that bring teachers and students together around content (Bryk et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2015). Bryk and colleagues (2010) view *program coherence* as rooted in the design of an *instructional guidance system* at the school level, in which

instructional approaches, curricular content, and assessment strategies are closely articulated to promote student learning at progressively more advanced levels of complexity (see also Hassrick, Raudenbush & Rosen, 2017). Challenging traditional norms of private practice, teachers shape team structures to sustain collective learning to improve the guidance system, supported and exhorted by a web of formal and informal leaders collaborating to sustain continuous improvement processes. School leaders then align other social, political, and technical “essential supports” around the core effort to improve instruction, “...orchestrating effectively across these and numerous other acts of improvement,” and removing other potential priorities from consideration (Bryk et al., 2010, p. 204). In turn, central office and intermediate level district officials are challenged to reimagine and redesign how their own structures, tools, and work priorities reinforce program coherence at the school level (Honig et al, 2014; Wohlstetter et al., 2016).

***Coherence as a Dynamic Process and Practice.*** It is tempting for district leaders to approach coherence as primarily a technical challenge, as the alignment of “objective” features of the organization - policies, budgets, strategic planning documents and the like. Honig & Hatch (2004) view coherence instead as a dynamic and continuous process of sense-making, strategic adjustment, optimizing competing factors, and harmonizing competing demands. As they note, “...coherence as a state of affairs is not a technical matter but a social construction produced through continual interactions among teachers, students, organizational structures, curriculum, and other tools of schooling” (p. 18). In keeping with the actual flux of demands from sources internal and external to school districts, effective large district CEOs “craft coherence” proactively through combinations of strategies such as coordinating the interests and actions of multiple stakeholders (i.e. bridging), protecting key processes and actors from external interference (i.e. buffering), and “brokering” key relationships and resource exchanges to further organizational goals (see also Durand et al., 2016; Asada et al., 2020). In turn, district leaders who evidence a process and “craft” orientation toward coherence place a premium on building the subjective capacity of the organization for learning, improvement, and identification of emerging opportunities (also Fullan & Quinn, 2015).

***Learning to Improve and the Practice of Coherence-Making.*** If coherence-making around the instructional core is a process and a practice, then it is eminently a process of learning, and in particular, learning to improve (Hubbard, Mehan & Stein, 2006; Bryk et al., 2015). In districts aspiring to achieve the goals of the Common Core State Standards, collective learning is imperative, since experience with inquiry-oriented pedagogies implicated in teaching for understanding is at best scattered and not widespread (Hiebert, Gallimore & Stigler, 2002; Panero & Talbert, 2013). Thus teachers and administrators seeking to cohere a more powerful instructional guidance system not only must make sense of improving practices of teaching, content design, and assessment, but also learn how to improve together in order to capitalize on collective knowledge and experience, and take better practices to scale in ways that address diverse student needs equitably (Bryk et al., 2010; Horn & Little, 2010; Stosich, 2016a). Analogous and steep learning curves confront central office and intermediate staff who must enact new collaborative work routines bridging departmental boundaries, and integrate new strategic inquiry processes into daily work patterns (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Panero & Talbert, 2013). At all district levels, the work of leading for learning involves a challenging mix of modeling a “learners stance” in interactions with colleagues, facilitating the selection of inquiry tools and on-going improvement of data-informed inquiry cycles, balancing the establishment of safe processes for debate and disagreement with collective accountability for enacting improvement routines, and deepening and distributing staff leadership and expertise in learning processes (Supowitz, 2006; Knapp et al., 2014).

In terms of the practice of coherence-making, a ubiquitous tension for district leaders involves the introduction of structures and routines of strategic inquiry, on the one hand, and the cultivation of a deeper culture of inquiry and critical analysis - both hallmarks of a “learning organization” (Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 2012; Glennan & Resnick, 2004). A substantial research literature supports the importance of well-designed structures, work routines, and tools not only for focusing group effort, but for deepening

individual identification with the values, knowledge, and ambitions of a skilled community of practice (Curtis & City, 2009; Spillane & Coldren, 2011). In the case of the inquiry cycles advanced by Improvement Science, for example, network structures and rapid cycles of innovation, failure, feedback, and design improvement embody inquiry values, inviting participants to view design failures as opportunities to better understand both the needs of users and variations in performance (LeMahieu, Grunow et al., 2017). At the same time, however, structures such as strategic planning meetings and routines such as goal benchmarking are notorious for devolving into rituals of compliance focused more on checking boxes than engaging in uncomfortable or courageous questioning related to the core mission (Peurach, Penuel & Russell, 2018). Similarly, the absence of key inquiry processes like analyses of root causes can lead to mis-diagnoses of learning problems and premature implementation of misaligned interventions (Cosner, 2012; Elmore et al., 2014). To keep organizational routines thoughtful, district leaders must regularly assess the quality of actual inquiry against the vision for professional learning, and integrate opportunities for reflection and feedback around problems of practice, in both job-embedded and dis-embedded settings, so that dynamics of continual learning surround and inform the dynamics of doing (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Horn & Little, 2010).

***Adaptive Leadership and Coherence within Complexity.*** Earlier we characterized large school districts in terms of their resistance to central governance - their messiness, turbulence, local interest, and emergent unpredictability. According to Durand and colleagues (2016) “Adaptive leadership is necessary when novelty, complexity, and uncertainty are apparent - in short, when there are no easy answers and leaders must engage in justifiable experimentation, often over an extended period of time” (p. 51). McDaniels (2007) has identified three signature features of adaptive leadership as both a mindset and organizing focus of collective practice within loosely coupled “complex adaptive systems” like school districts. The first feature, “sense-making,” he defines (following Weick, 2005), as “...a diagnostic process directed at constructing plausible interpretations of ambiguous cues that are sufficient to sustain action.” (p. 57). As an inquiry process, sense-making acknowledges the partiality of knowledge and evidence available to problem-solving at any given moment, and equips participants to query both the problem space and their own thinking, as a necessary prelude to action. Adaptive leaders value and facilitate sense-making opportunities across a wide range of collaborative settings as a way to build social cohesion around common representations of practice spaces (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001).

McDaniel frames the second feature, “learning,” in terms very similar to the tenets of Information Science (Bryk et al., 2015) and continuous improvement (e.g. Cobb et al., 2018). That is, for systems in which information is diversely interpreted and widely distributed, learning is better approached as an iterative, cyclic, and experimental process than as a linear, top-down sequence from planning to action phases. More effective collective learning proceeds in close contingency to action, variations in outcomes are valued and interrogated, small and rapid failures are exploited, and standards of evidence are debated. Social networks are configured to value diversity of interpretations and meanings assigned to outcomes from varied stakeholder groups. Leadership for learning in these terms attends closely to “...managing loose ties as well as tight ties, for engaging in rich, focused information exchanges as well as broad environmental scanning...” (p. 32). As McDaniel notes, the issue in complex, multi-tiered organizations is not lack of information. “What we lack is the time to pay close attention to the world so that we can be thoughtful about what is going on” (p. 31).

The third element, “improvisation,” involves the capacity of leaders and the organization to respond with innovation and resilience to circumstances of surprise and uncertainty. McDaniels emphasizes that organizational improvisation is a “social act” rather than an isolated attribute of individuals in that it follows from acts of collective sense-making and learning. Thus it is contingent on the degrees of freedom within social networks to support rich communication and information sharing across levels of the organization (p. 32). And adaptive managers must attend to designing and facilitating relationship webs that include groups that are tightly as well as more loosely coupled to the organization’s central



authority structures, and recognize and reward staff initiative and innovation (see also Daly & Finnegan, 2016). As McDaniels notes, “While it is tempting to want to defeat uncertainty and surprise with control and planning, it is improvisation that will enable organizations to generate productive responses to changing conditions.” Our introductory vignette suggests that patterns of communication and interaction within the CPS central office are supportive of improvisation as challenges to district coherence emerge for middle level professional staff.

Several researchers have proposed a high affinity between adaptive leadership and attention to leadership as a distributed property and function of complex organizations - what Spillane calls the Leader-Plus perspective (Spillane 2006). This is because adaptive leaders are aware of the multi-tiered and often “siloeed” structures within their organizations, the nodes of informal influence that vie with formal authority structures, and the potential for a broader range of actors to sense-make, learn and improvise in ways beneficial (or disruptive) to the organization (Durand et al., 2016; McDaniel, 2009). Thus adaptive leaders proactively attend to, as McDaniel puts it, pushing “...decision-making down to their staff so that workers can improvise in real-time and leverage the unfolding events” (p. 37). A critical focus of sense-making and learning for district CEOs involves discerning how to bridge, broker, and buffer strategic initiatives in ways that help middle-tier and local leaders exercise informed initiative while maintaining collective commitment to and understanding of the organization’s priority goals (Honig et al., 2014; Durand et al., 2016).

Further, the concept of “adaptivity” provides tools for addressing the features of capacity that adaptive leaders work to distribute more broadly through the organization. DeArment, Reed & Wetzel (2013), for example, draw upon a long research tradition around “adaptive expertise” to explore its importance to the practice and preparation of special education teachers. Defined as the capacity to flexibly apply routine or innovative solutions to novel problem spaces (NRC, 2000, 2005), “Adaptive expertise is of particular importance to the development of teaching professionals who face unpredictable and varied circumstances in their daily work with students” - an apt description of the system conditions regularly confronting special educators (DeArment, Reed & Wetzel, 2013). In turn, adaptive expertise is thought to combine dispositional features (e.g., strong metacognitive analytic capacity in messy problem spaces; a positive affective orientation toward challenges) along with sensitivity to contextual factors, and behavioral features linked to practice that are susceptible to development and training (e.g. uses of specific analytic protocols in novel problem settings) (Lin et al., 2007). If leadership itself is seen as a domain involving both routine and adaptive expertise and learning, then a key consideration of senior leadership becomes how to advance the development of adaptive leadership at all levels of the organization (Lefevre, Timperley & Ell, 2015). To conclude, we believe that features of adaptivity bearing on coherence-making will help illuminate Dr. Jackson’s emerging agenda to shift traditional accountability structures in the direction of better aligned and strategically thoughtful continuous improvement practices, beginning with central office planning and execution processes.

### **The CEo Period: From Crisis Management to a Foundation for District Coherence**

In July 2015, Dr. Janice K. Jackson, at 36 the Chief of CPS Network 9, was installed as the district’s new Chief Education Officer (CEo), in partnership with veteran public administrator Forrest Claypool, who took over as CEO. The CEo position had gone unfilled in recent administrations as CEOs attempted to consolidate the district’s academic leadership within the CEO portfolio. But now the fiscal challenges facing the district were dire, and Mr. Claypool, Mayor Emanuel’s Chief of Staff and a specialist in down-sizing ailing public bureaucracies, was being tasked with right-sizing administrative functions ahead of a looming budget crisis.<sup>3</sup> This in turn raised the need for a consummate CPS educator in the CEo

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent overview of the factors behind this budget crisis, see Education Week (May 16, 2016): [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1zBCy9odhAtwu1Kw6CY5QiiU9s8hBOMsneFp3X\\_ZtiB8/edit#gid=1978390677](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1zBCy9odhAtwu1Kw6CY5QiiU9s8hBOMsneFp3X_ZtiB8/edit#gid=1978390677).

position, to help assure that the intended administrative triage did not eviscerate the district's slow but steady achievement gains at the school level. For Mayor Emanuel, several features of Dr. Jackson's background and profile recommended her to take on this challenge.

To begin, at a time when the taint of recent scandal still dogged the CEO position, both Claypool and Jackson came to senior leadership with no prior association with CPS central office. While their learning curves would be steep, their profiles furthered the narrative that the district was turning the page on its recent ethical struggles. Second, behind Dr. Jackson's rapid climb to senior leadership in CPS was an exceptional record of local leadership and accomplishment. Starting in the late 1990's, a time when CPS was actively promoting innovative school models, Dr. Jackson became the founding principal of two cutting-edge Westside high school designs. The first was a small high school within the city's Gates-funded Chicago High School Redesign initiative (2004 - 2009), and located in one of Chicago's most stressed areas. She next was entrusted by CEO Arnie Duncan in 2009 with opening a second, high profile, hybrid selective-neighborhood high school in a new, state-of-the-art facility. At her insistence, each school prioritized Black and Brown students, became recognized for their rigorous instructional and teacher teaming models, and produced strong student results in areas like graduation, attendance, drop-out rates, and standardized test scores. Along the way she gained a reputation for transparency in her dealings with parents, and was recognized as a data-informed systems thinker among her peers and supervisors.

Third, and importantly, Dr. Jackson evidenced potential to become an effective "boundary spanner" at a moment when CPS needed leaders capable of bridging among stakeholders in an increasingly polarized political and social terrain (van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2019). Articulate and fluid in public settings, she combined an accomplished professional identity with rock solid roots in Chicago's African American community and CPS neighborhood schools, and an unabashed affection for her native city. A CPS parent, she could rightly claim first-hand experience with the difficulties of raising and advocating for children in Chicago. Further, it was life experience that she knew how to evoke in her daily interactions with CPS teachers and parents in ways that were both authentic and strategic for her leadership priorities.<sup>4</sup> A tireless advocate for public education and CPS, she nonetheless spoke frankly about inequities of access and outcomes for students of color in CPS as both professionally and morally untenable. These inequities grounded her strong commitments to the value of school choice and school accountability for student outcomes as key drivers of district-wide improvement. But she readily acknowledged the limits of choice and accountability policies as levers of school quality in low income communities, was skeptical of the history and yield of charter reform in Chicago, and championed the cause of neighborhood schools as anchors of community for Chicago's most vulnerable students. Whether speaking to a Westside parent group or a corporate luncheon, Dr. Jackson was both lucid and consistent in her philosophical commitments and optimistic about CPS' capacity to improve. And in the Mayor's experience, she was not afraid to talk straight about district realities, including to himself, and to propose thoughtful solutions forthrightly. From the angle of adaptivity, then, Dr. Jackson struck Mayor Emanuel as possessing a synthesis of ambition, authenticity, moral vigor, and strategic sophistication that could help CPS recover its credibility as a partner in children's learning across all communities in the city.<sup>5</sup>

### **Coherence as a Response to Institutional Crisis: Reasserting the CEo Role**

Chief Academic or Education Officers (CEo) roles first came to prominence in American education in the 1990's, complementing the trend to hire non-educators with senior corporate or military leadership credentials to move large urban school districts toward corporate management strategies and cultures of

<sup>4</sup> This theme of authenticity is well represented in an August 2019 article in Chicago Magazine: <http://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/September-2019/Can-Janice-Jackson-Save-CPS/>

<sup>5</sup> Mayor Emanuel first became acquainted with Dr. Jackson during a visit to the newly opened New Westinghouse High School in 2012. A sense of Dr. Jackson's rapport with the Mayor as CEo may be gained from this video of a joint public announcement in 2016: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NER1U\\_eYMdw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NER1U_eYMdw).

data-driven accountability (Mathews, 2001; Ferren & Stanton, 2004). While these CEO's often brought solid credentials in organizational improvement, the wisest among them acknowledged the need for expert guidance around educational issues, grounded in local context. Thus CEEdO's often were cast as a district's #2 executive leader with two core responsibilities. The first was to translate the CEO's values, vision, and administrative mandate into a re-designed, cohesive instructional program that would produce measurable improvements in student learning in a relatively brief timeframe. Accomplishing this surfaced coherence, design, and professional learning issues at every level of the system, from the development of teacher PD around new instructional strategies, to the reorientation of school leaders to developing teacher learning and teaming, to the deployment of teacher coaching roles to support ambitious learning for improvement (Hubbard, Mehan & Stein, 2006; Supowitz, 2006). Second, at the central office level, CEEdO's were tasked with integrating the missions of formerly siloed curricular and academic support functions into a better orchestrated delivery system keyed to the instructional core. While the role offered clear opportunities as a stepping stone to CEO positions, it could also expose CEEdOs to considerable political jeopardy as the point persons for educational improvement. The well-known case of Anthony Alvarado in San Diego illustrates that even the most robust reform credentials will not insulate a CEEdO from political exposure if challenges to old power structures come too quickly, leaving core stakeholders to wonder if they are truly valued partners in change designs (Hess, 2005; Hubbard, Mehan & Stein, 2006).

While the scope and purview of CEEdO roles are generally quite broad, the actual breadth of the mandate can involve some negotiation with CEOs, boards, mayors and other hiring authorities (Mathews, 2001). In Dr. Jackson's case, the role of CEEdO in Chicago had a storied recent past, in which a stable partnership between CEO Arnie Duncan and CEEdO Barbara Eason Watkins had ushered CPS into a vigorous if controversial 8-year period of district transformation (Elmore, Grossman & King, 2006; Payne, 2008). Distinctive initiatives included district-wide, research-based reading and math initiatives; well-designed professional development programs; the adoption of the University of Chicago's Five Essential Supports framework (5Es) as an evidence-based guide for school improvement planning; data infrastructure partnerships with organizations like the UChicago Consortium for Schools Research (CCSR); deepening supports for principals' instructional leadership development; and launching of a small high schools initiative to increase personalization and rigor in instruction (Elmore, Grossman King, 2006). To gain a firm foothold on district coherence, especially in the context of encroaching fiscal constraints, Dr. Jackson took several adaptive steps to secure the authority of the CEEdO role from summer 2015 through winter 2016. These steps would establish a foundation for addressing instructional coherence issues on CPS' "academic side" after the dust of fiscal and departmental reorganization had settled.

***Developing a CEEdO Entry Plan.*** One of the disciplines advocated by Dr. Jackson's doctoral program at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and consistent with acknowledged best practice in the executive leadership literature, is the practice of developing a detailed entry plan at the outset of any school leadership position.<sup>6</sup> This is a practice that Dr. Jackson had executed from the time of her first high school leadership position. Such a plan usually includes a diagnostic assessment of the school's primary challenges based on a data profile, a theory of action for addressing those challenges with particular attention to the improvement of instruction, and a 30-60-90 strategic plan for establishing conditions to advance an improvement agenda. At the outset of her tenure, Dr. Jackson drew upon that discipline as well as close relationships with two UIC coach/mentors to frame an entry plan to ground her strategic aspirations and focus her emerging team (see plan summary and 30-day overview, [Exhibit 1](#)). Some notable emphases of that plan include:

<sup>6</sup> For representative discussions in school leadership entry planning, see: a) <https://www.broadcenter.org/blog/entry-planning/>; b) <https://www.principalcenter.com/wp-content/uploads/Entry%20Plan%20Your%20First%20100%20Days%20in%20the%20New%20School%20Year.pdf>.

- *The plan is clearly collaborative.* While prior entry plans in her career were primarily personal guides, this plan meant to mobilize her early staff around her immediate tactical priorities. Many of the entries are addressed to Dr. Jackson in the voice of key staffers, and the preamble is a clear public statement of vision and values.
- *The plan sets a tone.* Four key themes predominate: first, that significant shifts in the relationship of schools to the bureaucracy, in favor of service to schools, will be required to sustain recent advances, and that CPS has the resources to make that shift; second, that crises pose opportunities for making the fundamental shift in favor of service to schools; third, that disciplined teamwork toward strategic goals will be the engine to accomplish that shift; and fourth, that the effort will be sustained with stability in subsequent years.<sup>7</sup>
- *The plan articulates a broad theory of change:* “Articulate that our theory of change is centered on empowering teacher and principal leadership. This includes: 1) The individual school is the key to all improvement efforts; 2) we will focus on supporting principals in every way possible, not on dictating policy from the central office; 3) our teachers are the greatest driver of educational outcomes.”
- *From tactical to strategic.* While acknowledging the tactical press of opening schools on time with clarity around staffing and resources, the urgency to organize toward a strategic stance is explicit. Three strategic priorities are immediately named - principal quality, teacher quality, and high school improvement - and actions to specify internal and external working group members by expertise and affiliations are timed in the first 90 days. The objective of recruiting senior department leaders with strategic planning orientations is explicit.
- *Communication is key.* Effective and compelling communication and connection strategies are the unifying thread across all objectives and stakeholder groups. Staffers involved in writing the plan have a strong grasp of Dr. Jackson’s thematic priorities, and a sophisticated grasp on entry points with varied stakeholder groups. Particular attention is paid to lines of communication and engagement with the CEO and Board of Education members around common priorities and clarity and transparency of messaging to schools and educators around budgetary issues.
- *Partners are key.* Engagement with external partner organizations is prominent. Some long-time collaborators are central to several objectives, such as CCSR (in providing data and research expertise) and the Chicago Public Education Fund<sup>8</sup> (or CPEF, particularly in principal and leadership development). Other partners are earmarked for membership on the strategic working groups listed earlier, both for their expertise and for the opportunity to engage them as critical allies. This intentionality around external partnership will continue to evolve in terms of institutional mechanisms for aligning partners and funders to the district’s strategic priorities.

***Managing Up: Negotiating a Scope of Authority.*** A distinctive feature of mayoral control of public schools in Chicago is the latitude it grants for mayors to appoint other senior officials beyond the Chief Executive Officer. It is clear that Mayor Emanuel had identified Dr. Jackson as a future district leader from his earliest encounters with her as an innovative high school principal in 2012, when she managed to pull a high profile public event together at her high school on the City’s behalf, quickly and with notable success. Subsequently the Mayor engaged her views frequently on education policy matters when she rose to Chief of Network 9 in 2014. Thus, when the Mayor offered her the CEEdO position in summer

<sup>7</sup> The second paragraph of the plan’s preamble summary reads: “In the years to come, the work of continuing improvement will rely heavily on defining and effectively executing a new vision for the relationship between educators and the bureaucracy that either supports their work or hinders it. The current financial strain presents a unique opportunity to clarify, streamline and focus this relationship in ways that accelerate student achievement and grow the city’s ability to attract and keep top talent. As a new administration assumes leadership, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has significant strengths to build upon and a few key opportunities to achieve even more substantial progress.”

<sup>8</sup> In addition, CPEF (or “The Fund”) played an important facilitative role for Dr. Jackson and her new staff as they transitioned into central office leadership, based on several years of partnership between the Fund and CPS in areas such as principal development and building data infrastructure. Fund staff provided Dr. Jackson and her team with briefings and research services on a wide range of issues facing CPS; brokered conversations and meetings; and advised on an array of transition-related matters. See: <https://thefundchicago.org/>.

2015, it was not a surprise to senior CPS and City officials, and Dr. Jackson understood how to express her vision for the position in terms of strength that the Mayor would approve and support. As Deputy Chief of Staff Sadie Jefferson put it, "She is a bold leader but has the credibility and respect to back it."

This in turn established an independent base of Mayoral support from which Dr. Jackson could approach the new CEO to establish a mutually beneficial working alliance. Dr. Jackson would actively support Mr. Claypool's emerging agenda to restructure CPS for fiscal solvency, and take the lead in configuring the academic functions of CPS to absorb those cuts while sustaining the district's academic progress. This would include a significant public role in support of the CEO's agenda and as an advocate for budget justice for CPS, especially in the state capital. Mr. Claypool for his part would grant Dr. Jackson a broad mandate to shape the district's academic culture and steer the district's academic course according to a strategic plan of her devising within the fiscal constraints imposed by Claypool's restructuring regime. The division of labor that emerged gave Mr. Claypool sufficient control of the district's operations and budgetary functions to enact his very specific mandate to address a looming budget crisis. But it also authorized Dr. Jackson broadly to build alliances with operational departments while directly reframing the priorities of academic departments around coherence and continuous improvement.

***Establishing a Capable CEo Team.*** A consensus view among Dr. Jackson's senior colleagues at CPS is that she has an exceptional eye for leadership talent fit to critical functions. As one department director put it, "...one of her strengths...is getting really smart, good, competent people in those roles...." Because the CEo office was not staffed and resources were tight, Dr. Jackson needed to move quickly to secure talented staff who could carry her emerging vision forward. Through autumn 2015 she assembled a diverse portfolio of talent from her prior associations as a principal and network chief who brought distinct strengths and experiences to the table, and who she felt she could trust. This core staff coalesced over the next two and a half years into an effective team that earned the respect of senior central office leaders for their competence and judgment, for guarding Dr. Jackson's flanks from unwanted surprises, and for monitoring relentlessly to keep priority initiatives on-track. Stability in these core staff functions was a key factor in maintaining momentum on initiatives that particularly cut against the grain of business-as-usual within CPS central office.

***Enlisting Central Office Leaders: Reframing "the Re-Org" as Coherence-Making.*** Given the recent lapse in the CEo role, a fundamental challenge for Dr. Jackson in the first six months of her tenure was to reorient all central office Chiefs and department directors on the "academic side" of central office to her leadership and authority. This had to be done within a prevailing climate of fear among academic leaders at all system levels that the new CEO's cadre of business consultants would drive a fiscal down-sizing agenda absent any consideration for core academic functions, possibly leading to their own terminations. While the central office climate felt anxious and toxic to many, the situation created an opportunity for Dr. Jackson to build early conversations with Office Chiefs and department directors predicated on positioning each unit to protect its highest impact workstreams, while also beginning the work of aligning departments more strategically to school needs and the instructional core.

To effect this shift in focus, the new CEo posed three basic questions to academic leaders: *How is your work accessible to principals? To teachers? And how does it advance the academic success of students?*<sup>9</sup> Chiefs and directors knew to come prepared to CEo meetings with documents that assessed their current projects and workstreams against those three questions. These conversations and documents, in turn, provided an evidence base from which to engage the CEO and his consultants around protecting high

<sup>9</sup> As Dr. Jackson further framed her view on these questions in 2017 from the principals' perspective: "It goes back to those three questions. If principals don't feel like they can access what we are producing, if they don't feel like that's helping them do better, then we shouldn't be doing it and we need to figure something else out."

priority workstreams, staff positions, and resources based on their value to sustaining student academic progress - a substantive as well as political priority for CPS and City Hall. At least as reflected in our interviews, the cumulative impact of this bridging and buffering work by Dr. Jackson was to elevate features of *reciprocal accountability* on the “academic side” of central office (Elmore 2004). That is, central office staff and leaders began to internalize accountability for addressing Dr. Jackson’s “Three Big Questions” as a core principle of their leadership practice. And they developed confidence that Dr. Jackson could and would support them in sustaining their most impactful work when the argument was framed in terms of instructional coherence.

***Reshaping School Communications.*** As would be expected from any CEdO, Dr. Jackson made regular visits to district schools a priority during the period of reorganization through early spring 2016. More strategic, however, was the attention that she and her team paid to dynamics of communication with teachers and principals - both what was messaged most loudly, and how communication channels would be managed. Three communication gambits were particularly consequential to the CEdO’s standing with school personnel. First, and particularly in the context of fiscal fears, the CEdO team proactively translated its theory of change, keyed to principal and teacher empowerment, into statements of respect and honor for the work of teachers and school administrators. Particularly consistent in school emails and newsletters were the ideas that the most complex district work was performed daily by school-level professionals (not central office staff), and that central office would be configured to support school-level decision-making. Second, Dr. Jackson made a clear commitment to principals to gather their input into district policy stances through multiple channels, and assure that she personally informed them of policy shifts in a timely fashion.<sup>10</sup> This was an acknowledgement of past district communication lapses, with the result that principals often heard of district policy changes through the news media at the same time as the general public.

Third, the CEdO team moved to reconfigure the system of communications with principals to address the fragmented *status quo* in which principals were inundated with emails and newsletters from multiple central office departments. The CEdO’s “principal bulletin” organized weekly communications with principals in order of policy priority, and provided an index of other central office messages organized by department. Central office departments were prohibited from sending emails independently to principals, and a digital tool was established to collect communication requests from departments for inclusion in the principal bulletin which was easily accessible on-line. This was the first time that the central office had streamlined communications in this way, receiving a very favorable review from CPS principals. At the same time this move provided a mechanism for the CEdO team to control and align messaging to principals with greater coherence and intentionality.

To summarize this section, Heifetz (2006) has characterized an adaptive challenge as “a gap between aspirations and reality that demands a response outside the current repertoire.” For new CPS CEdO Janice Jackson in summer 2015, the primary adaptive challenge was to initiate features of a transformational agenda for central office support of school improvement within stressful and constrained conditions favoring transactional institutional responses - compliance, self-interest, and risk-aversion. To hold off on introducing her core priorities could risk “locking in” patterns of compliance thinking and siloed functioning that would undermine innovation across the system for years.

Dr. Jackson’s response to this complex and fluid entry situation exhibited several features of adaptivity that would become signature features of her district leadership in ensuing years. In building her core team around *a proactive entry plan*, the CEdO began to model the level of strategic thinking and iterative

<sup>10</sup> As her Deputy Chief of Staff Eva Giglio put it, “She worked really hard to shift the communication structures with principals. Her philosophy was, ‘I may not have good news to tell you, but I’m going to tell it to you anyway. I’m going to be the one you hear it from, and I’m not going to hide information from you.’ She did a lot of outreach to ensure that principals were receiving communication.”

flexibility that she intended to socialize and cultivate across the central office. The plan set out a weekly cadence for addressing entry objectives, but made clear that the protocol must function as a living document for collective revision and improvement. She also made early sense of the power dynamics between herself, the CEO, and the Mayor, proving adept at combining transactional and transformational leadership strategies in order to secure their support for her control over the district's academic agenda. She frankly engaged central office leaders, Network Chiefs, and principals about the pragmatic need to, in Heifetz's terms, "distinguish what's precious and essential from what's expendable..." within their units (2006, p. 80). But the criterion she introduced for making that distinction - her "Three Big Questions" - gave concrete expression to her instructional and moral vision - to shift central office mindsets toward service, and more powerfully align to supporting the instructional core in the best interests of CPS children. Thus while she bonded with her colleagues and school stakeholders in acknowledging the pain of trimming programs and budgets, she started building shared accountability for back-mapping department priorities from their impacts on student learning. As a consequence, the new CEdO emerged from the first months of right-sizing with an enhanced reputation for transparency, principled pragmatism, and political acumen, winning the provisional trust and confidence of central office leaders in her commitment to an ambitious educational agenda.

### **Building a Learning Agenda for Academic Coherence from the CEdO Platform**

While severe fiscal constraints remained the norm for CPS through autumn 2017, the primary budget and staffing cuts enacted by early spring 2016 provided sufficient clarity around the new status quo for Dr. Jackson to initiate an agenda for institutional transformation aimed at instructional coherence. Her theory of action drew deeply from the literature of school- and district-level instructional leadership, filtered through her experiences as a high school principal - articulate a compelling normative vision for district success based on stakeholder consensus; re-align daily professional practices and partnerships to strengthen the instructional core; address the professional learning demands entailed in changing mindsets and practices; and organize a leadership cadre with the skills necessary to build staff capacity for cycles of learning and implementation (Honig, 2008; Knapp et al., 2014; Leithwood & Azah, 2017). From the angle of adaptivity, the circumstances for advancing district coherence at that juncture were rarely more daunting or emergent. Internally, staff were apprehensive and demoralized.<sup>11</sup> Externally, public confidence was severely depleted, and a teachers strike a distinct possibility. The situation would call for elements of inspiration, iterative and disciplined learning with robust feedback to effort, and nimble improvisation to re-boot public support and build a climate of reciprocal accountability for learning to improve.

***Active Listening with Teachers and School Administrators.*** The initial months of establishing the CEdO role had included a wide range of public engagements with CPS constituents, ranging from in-person community and school-based meetings to budget webinars, webcasts, call-in radio, and local television. These appearances were often driven by the need to get ahead of a volatile district fiscal dilemma. Where and whenever possible across these media settings, the new CEdO aimed to engage stakeholders directly and frankly in ways that would communicate authenticity, transparency and a learner's stance to criticism. Beginning in spring 2016 this approach took a more proactive and strategic turn in a series of outreach activities designed both to inform district decision-making and build a firmer basis for public confidence and engagement. Among the earliest of these initiatives was a two-month "listening tour" with teachers intended to hear from a representative cross-section of district instructors. The tour reached every area of the city, with particular attention to hearing from teacher leaders with a reputation for strong instructional

<sup>11</sup> Some sense of the prevailing climate at CPS central office at this time comes through in this vignette from Deputy Chief of Staff Eva Giglio: "I was walking out of the restroom and some woman who I didn't know...said 'One out of 10.' I go, what? What was that? And she goes, 'You're the first person out of the 10 people who just walked out who smiled and said hello to me.' And I was like, Oh. And I don't know if she was hired to do some sort of cultural assessment or something. I have no idea...She might've just been a random visitor who was noticing things seemed weird...I never saw her again, but it really struck me."

and teaming skills. The meetings ranged from 20-30 teachers, and were structured to allow easy interaction the Dr. Jackson and other senior district academic leaders. The agenda was guided by a straight-forward question: What do you want me to know as your CEEdO? The resulting teacher feedback was frank and pointed, and a detailed record was made of each meeting.

Two follow-ons from the teacher listening tour made the process consequential for the CEEdO's agenda, and shaped a public engagement strategy that would further evolve in the ensuing two years. First, and honoring a commitment to synthesize and communicate the learning from the tour, the CEEdO staff re-convened the first round of teachers in a large event in April 2016. Attendees included several central office senior administrators and Network Chiefs as well as the CEEdO staff. The CEEdO personally communicated the major findings and a set of proposed district responses to teacher concerns, and requested further feedback. Breakout sessions in specific areas of concern (e.g. special education challenges) permitted more extensive conversation and mutual learning, and more elaborated input from teachers to policy proposals. Input from teachers was visibly highlighted in subsequent policy statements around specific concerns.

Second, the CEEdO staff designed a structure to channel the energy from the listening tour into a more permanent consultative capacity, the Teacher Advisory Council (or TAC). This group of roughly 30-40 members would be assembled annually from teachers across the district via an application process, starting with the pool of teachers who had attended the touring sessions. The TAC would collaborate with central office staff to choose a broad area of focus for collective work, and was free to sub-organize its work around specific features of a problem - for example, improving teacher retention - as well as offer feedback around more emergent district problems. In addition, teams of TAC members were free to propose specific programs or models to address the TAC's focal problem. While not all proposals would be funded or picked up by a department, a few TAC proposals have gained district-wide traction, including an innovative mentorship design for new teachers that annually engages over 150 new teachers with professional supports not previously available in the district. The TAC in turn became the template for re-developing other pre-existing advisory groups for principals, parents, and students into consultative bodies with greater influence on CPS policies. The design principles of that template would include:

- Design outreach processes and structures that communicate a commitment to transparency and an invitation to critical input and feedback from constituents. Personally engage in those critical conversations with deference to constituent opinions.
- Commit to synthesizing the range of constituent views for further verification by participants, and formulate policy recommendations with explicit reference to those views. Structure substantive opportunities to verify or critique the synthesis.
- Where possible, parlay the collective energy from the outreach/feedback process into more stable and long-term structures that harness constituent feedback as an asset for district planning, implementation, policy development, and improvement efforts.

While no design features of the teacher listening tour were strikingly innovative, the commitment to attentive engagement and transparency within the process had been absent from central office engagement with teachers for several years. The listening tour thus signaled a significant shift in tone and practice from the central office toward line staff, and contributed toward Dr. Jackson's success as a good faith intermediary in talks with the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) to head off a wildcat strike in late spring and summer of 2016. In turn, the listening tour experience would directly inform the CEEdO's approach to articulating a vision statement with real capacity to coalesce district energy around a common improvement agenda.

***Concerted Outreach and Engagement with School Principals.*** Among the top three strategic emphases of transformational districting highlighted by Meredith Honig (2014) is "establishing learning-focused



partnerships between the central office and schools” (p. 89). Reflecting a broad consensus in this area, a recent New Leaders/AREL report also noted: “Principals are more effective when central office staff and school leaders work together to differentiate district policies and improve them over time” (Ikemoto et al., 2014, p. 17). At the core of this strategy is a range of initiatives to elevate the instructional leadership capacity of principals, as well as their capacity and authorization to collaborate on an equal footing with central office and school network leadership. For Dr. Jackson, moving concertedly to develop such capacity was personal as well as strategic. As a recent principal she had experienced first-hand the acute accountability shouldered by school administrators for student outcomes as well as the lip service often paid by central office staff to valuing principal partnership. As a Network Chief, and despite a general elevation of principal quality, she had grappled with the wide variation in principal capacity to think strategically, engage colleagues collaboratively, and organize for instructional improvement. As CEEdO, then, a central priority was to begin supporting and developing principals to contribute centrally to aligning the entire district system more powerfully to the needs of schools and students, especially those with the greatest learning challenges.

During the CEEdO period Dr. Jackson’s team moved on several fronts to elevate principal influence and standing as design and practice partners. At the level of messaging, Dr. Jackson frequently emphasized the complexity of the daily practice lives of principals and teachers, particularly in group interactions with central office and network staff. This conviction was part of her broader agenda to “flip the script” away from hierarchical dynamics of positional power, status, and privilege, and toward a coherence-based service orientation toward school professionals and students. Large celebratory events such as the Administrators Summit further reinforced the centrality of principals to the district’s theory of action around school improvement. Second, the effort to streamline communications with principals noted earlier in 2015 had the longer-term impact of reducing redundant and duplicative central office requests – signaling greater respect for the principal’s time and energy – as well as increasing clarity around priorities from the CEEdO and central office departments. Asked what she thought principals were noticing in this period, Chief of ONS Bogdana Chkoumbova noted, “The reduction of bureaucracy and how do you measure this, but, and really the frequency in which you get the same response from multiple people, right? If you hear the same response and we’re very consistent and very clear. For me that’s a big one.”

Third, the CEEdO staff diversified opportunities to consult with and gain input from principals regularly. Surveys, focus groups, and panel discussions with principals in large district gatherings became more frequent, and the foci of input requests more consequential. The Principal Advisory Council, established originally in 2013, became a more significant consultative body around initiatives such as the development of talent pipeline systems, while principal surveys solicited reviews of central office and network level supports for schools, teachers, and school leaders. Finally, a visible effort was made to diversify opportunities for professional learning for school administrators, and to make learning and developmental opportunities more ubiquitous features of engagement with principals. Survey input from principals, for example, strongly signaled their preference for networked learning opportunities in areas of common leadership practice. In response, the CEEdO team more regularly integrated workshop-level specialized learning sessions into consultative meetings with principals as well as district-wide events such as the Summer Leadership Institutes. A Principal Fellows Program was established in partnership with Northwestern University to provide annual cohorts of maturing principals with executive leadership training outside of the daily pressures of school management. And principals increasingly were integrated into cross-level strategic conversations with central office and network staff designed to tackle pressing problems of practice such as high school improvement from a collaborative and learning stance. As CEEdO lead team member Eva Giglio saw it, these conversations represented an important departure from prior approaches to introducing new initiatives at scale.

*The academic chiefs met with the principals in each network to talk through the big components of the high school strategy and hear what it would mean for their schools and talk about it. That*

*was definitely a different approach; academic chiefs invested a lot of time to go out to 14 different networks and meet with a fairly small group of people. But it was really meaningful that way since the questions around high school strategy for Network 1 are going to look different than those for Network 9, and this was a way that chiefs could really address and talk to the principals in an individualized manner. It goes back to that priority of really respecting principals and making sure that they get the information first.*

**Performance Management Phase I: Pivoting PM toward Continuous Strategic Improvement.** While CEEdO Jackson and her team were developing their initial outreach to constituents outside of central office, they also initiated a process to induct central office leaders and teams into practices of performance management and continuous improvement. Two lenses informed Dr. Jackson’s sense of urgency around the re-introduction of performance management practices to central office. From a perspective of fairness and shared accountability, as we have seen, she brought to her role an acute awareness of the pressures on district principals and teachers not only to assemble strategic plans against a demanding district template – the bi-annual *Continuous Improvement Work Plan* or CIWP<sup>12</sup> – but to organize teacher teams for regular cycles of inquiry and improvement.<sup>13</sup> As a recent Network Chief she was also acutely aware of the highly variable quality of those practices across district schools.

Still, excellence in strategic planning and continuous improvement was most advanced around a common model among CPS principals – and noticeably absent from central office department practices. As she expressed it in spring 2017, “...we are bringing these cycles of continuous improvement that exist at the school level down from central office. And I think that's critically important because that wasn't there before. You had all this accountability at the school level, the CIWP, but it didn't exist in central office and it didn't exist in the network.” In turn, and viewed through a capacity lens, Dr. Jackson considered a foundation in disciplined CI practices to be the sine qua non for coordinating the efforts of central office departments with greater synergy and power in service of school improvement. In this sense it would be unfair to expect greater accountability and synergy from central office departments unless they were equipped with a powerful and common language and methodology for aligning and improving their strategies.

To understand both the challenges and affordances involved in this process for the CEEdO team, we will need to appreciate the recent history of performance management practices in CPS’ institutional memory. In 2009 Ronald Huberman was named CPS CEO with a mandate from Mayor Richard Daley to apply corporate performance management (PM) strategies to the improvement of both operational efficiency and academic achievement. Huberman had distinguished himself as a capable data-driven performance manager as Daley’s chief of staff as well in senior positions at the Chicago Transit Authority and Chicago Police Department. While lacking experience as an educator, his success with instituting PM practices in these other entrenched bureaucracies seemed well suited to the challenge of reorganizing CPS, particularly as the budget implications of the looming “Great Recession” of 2008 were looming. For his part, Huberman embraced a “shock and awe” approach to public management, believing that confronting managers with the “brutal facts” of underperformance and providing data and tools to plan strategically would foster deeper accountability for service to schools, parents, and students at every level of the district. Huberman recruited a team of senior managers from his prior assignments to train CPS central

<sup>12</sup> For a thorough guide to the SY 2020 CIWP process, see: <http://www.cpsarts.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CIWP-Planning-Companion-Guide.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> As she reflected in retrospect in 2018, “My doctoral studies at UIC, the work that I did as a principal around continuous improvement, and my experiences leading with vision and focus and towards targets helped me identify that what was happening pretty regularly in many of our schools needed to happen more at the network level and at the district office level. I saw it as an opportunity for us to not only be more effective at our roles but also as an opportunity to retain talent. There are long term benefits when you retain talent, and people stay around longer when they know what is going on, when they feel like they are part of something and they are doing something.”

office managers in data-driven goal-setting and other performance management techniques. And while his messaging to CPS managers was bracing, he also emphasized that he was more interested in hearing cogent analyses from managers about why key metrics were “in the red” than hearing spin or happy talk about metrics lacking substance or ambition.

That said, it was the Huberman team’s way of enacting transparency and accountability – namely, the public PM interrogatory – that left a lasting impression with CPS managers at all system levels. These sessions, held in a large CPS conference space and open to the public, focused intensely on the priority performance metrics of individual CPS central office departments, network offices, and schools. While in theory the department manager drove the agenda with a PowerPoint data presentation, the situation was indeed shocking for CPS managers who had little experience with this level of public exposure. Mr. Huberman and his team led the interrogation of findings, were exacting in their questions and critiques, and challenged managers to formulate action steps on the spot to “move the needle” on the most lagging indicators by the next PM session. Resources to help department managers to generate new data or think through their tactical and strategic adjustments to fulfill these action steps remained thin, and anxiety about complying with the Huberman team’s expectations in PM sessions became widespread as similar PM processes were introduced at the network and school levels.

Further, as PM moved from central office operational departments and into the system’s “academic side,” thorny issues such as how to measure the quality of classroom instruction – a critical issue for actually engaging the instructional core - became more pressing. In response, Huberman’s team encouraged academic departments to focus on what they could quantify, raising doubt in the minds of central office academic leaders about whether PM narrowly restricted to data interrogation could advance collective learning around instructional improvement or curricular rigor. As LaTanya McDade, a future CEdO and principal through the PM period, reflected about her experience of PM at this time:

*As a principal, I talked about my data and why it was the way it was. But I don't remember coming to any of those performance management sessions and talking about whether or not I've done a thorough root cause analysis. Whether or not this problem of practice that I have identified is really the problem that I need to be solving at this time and why. I don't remember talking about what my action plan was, what milestones I had and whether or not I had a theory of action that is a logic model that really gets to why I have this impact goal or what the implementation looks like along the way.*

While Mr. Huberman may have miscalculated the negative impacts of linking PM to punitive dynamics, several veterans of the Huberman era with whom we spoke credited PM with introducing the disciplined interrogation of data into district decision-making and culture. As Chief of Talent Matthew Lyons noted, “I’d say the one really lasting part of the Huberman tenure was that data started being indispensable, even if people didn’t know how to use it, which is sometimes a little scary and a little dangerous.... I would say at that time we were kind of like looking for answers as an organization in the data, like mining it almost.” In turn, the centrality of data to CPS management in the post-NCLB regime, along with the presence of a strong data infrastructure and facilitative data partnerships, afforded CEdO Jackson critical resources with which to invite central office leaders into a process of data-informed strategic planning. This process would hold the potential to build collective accountability while enabling and authorizing department staffs to plan, design, test and improve effective instructional support strategies. After initiating an internal review of the history and current status of PM practices, CEdO Jackson took several steps in 2016 to reframe and re-boot PM as a strategic and continuous improvement and learning process.

*A monthly academic leadership team meeting.* Late in winter 2016 the CEdO team initiated a monthly convening of the leadership teams of all offices and departments under the CEdO’s direction. Primary participants would be office chiefs, department directors and program managers, with other specialized

unit staff members invited as appropriate to the meeting focus. The meetings were calendared to promote maximum and consistent attendance. The distinguishing feature of this meeting from the outset was collective inquiry based on strong adult learning practices – for example, the introduction of challenging readings; small group break-out sessions with subsequent report-outs; fish bowl simulations; and continuity of focus across multiple meetings. CEEdO Jackson used early meetings to introduce her framework for performance management as a continuous improvement process within a learning organization, and a way of addressing her “Three Big Questions” within annual strategic plans. The meetings moved at a brisk cadence, and shifted quickly to introducing foundational ideas for PM, an introductory structure for codifying strategic plans, and a shared language for discussing features of PM practice. The immediate goal was to equip every academic department to execute an initial strategic plan followed by a performance management session with the CEEdO team by summer 2016.

*Aspiring to Convergence: Introducing the Collaboration Continuum.* Dr. Jackson understood the power of a common language for drawing academic unit leaders away from a “silo mentality,”<sup>14</sup> and into a more cohesive community of practice. Early on, the CEEdO team identified the OCLC’s “Collaboration Continuum” (CC) as a particularly adaptable framework for distinguishing different levels of cooperative action within complex organizations, and situating PM within a collective understanding of organizational improvement. The CC emerged from the OCLC’s research agenda aimed at promoting closer and more powerful collaborative arrangements and information flow between libraries, archives, and museums (or LAM) (Zorich, Waibel & Erway 2008)<sup>15</sup>. It defines five levels of inter-organizational interaction and information transaction, ranging from initial contact, cooperation, and coordination as preliminary stages, to collaboration and convergence at the higher and more complex ends of integration and creativity. Convergence in particular represents a point of aspiration at which sustained collaboration takes on the status of an organization’s system or infrastructure supporting the accomplishment of its most ambitious objectives (see [Exhibit 2](#)).

Two features of the CC were particularly useful to the early stages of re-culturing PM as system of strategic initiative. First, the CC is at once ethical and pragmatic in its focus. It obliges unit managers to think and reach outside their unit boxes and learn new ways of cooperative action to accomplish the organization’s most ambitious and complex goals. At the same time, it recognizes that not all goals require extensive collaboration, nor are resources adequate to commit to collaboration in all problem spaces. Thus all unit managers must think strategically about the complexities and available resources in a problem space to build collaborative capacity through the life of a project. Second, the CC provides a language for staging cooperative action that can help managers strategize about building collaborative arrangements as well as learning to collaborate. Both features of the CC helped the CEEdO team present PM as a collaborative process combining the efforts and learning of multiple departments, rather than as a punitive process focused only on the isolated successes of individual leaders, staffs, and departments.

*New tools and routines for strategic planning and review.* By late winter 2016 the CEEdO team had fielded an inaugural set of conceptual tools for engaging department teams in strategic planning for the remainder of the 2015-2016 school year. The PM presentation deck integrates a “cycle of inquiry” logo that signals the on-going and iterative nature of action and improvement intended by the CEEdO (see [Exhibit 3](#)). As a technical platform they utilized a Google Slides format with template tables to facilitate ease of completion and presentation. [Exhibit 4](#) provides the general template for this spring 2016 tool. In various

<sup>14</sup> For an accessible discussion of the concept “silo mentality” as an impediment to organizational transformation, see: <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/s/silo-mentality.asp>.

<sup>15</sup> The Open Content Library Cooperative (OCLC.org), “...a global library cooperative that provides shared technology services, original research and community programs for its membership and the library community at large. We are librarians, technologists, researchers, pioneers, leaders and learners. With thousands of library members in more than 100 countries, we come together as OCLC to make information more accessible and more useful.” See: <https://www.oclc.org/en/about.html>.

ways the tables and recommended sequence codify aspects of the CEEdO's "Three Big Questions" and the Collaboration Continuum, within a format that otherwise reflects basic strategic goal setting and project management principles. The primary elements of the strategic planning sequence include:

- A statement of the department's mission and/or vision, along with statements of up to 4 strategic priorities (i.e. unit goals or objectives for the academic year). The goals were accompanied by bullet summaries of the unit's budget and grant sources, and total number of staff positions available to engage the priorities;
- A standard "box and arrow" logic model applied to priority, with the following elements:
  - A statement of the "situation" or baseline status of the priority, explicitly based on evidence sources
  - A set of "If we" and "Then" statements, comprising actions or levers designed to yield a substantive improvement from the baseline state, followed by how these actions or levers would yield changes accessible to principals, teachers, and/or students
  - A corresponding set of implementation and impact goals or targets, denoting measureable markers of progress and performance targets in affecting the "If we" actions and "Then" statements;
- For each priority's logic model, and reflecting expectations of the need for inter-department collaborations, a summary of:
  - The "interdependencies" of the plan, i.e. the contingent contributions from other CPS departments necessary to fully meet the implementation and impact goals
  - The named lead partners or department staff necessary (and committed to) contributing to those goals
  - A description of the means of collaboration and inter-departmental communication
- For each Strategic Priority, an Action Plan with a specified timetable and tasking summary around implementation and impact goals, along with the familiar "green/yellow/red" coding for progress status, namely:
  - Specific "milestones" (i.e. actions or deliverables) relevant to tracking progress toward "deep implementation" of the strategic priority. The table requires specification of start and end dates, a baseline level of completion, and regular check-in dates
  - "Key Progress Indicators" (KPIs) for each implementation and impact goal, with metrics updated monthly and summarized for EOY (i.e., "end of year").

*Re-framing PM sessions with senior CEEdO and district staff.* Just as in the Huberman era, a key feature of the annual cadence of strategic planning would be one or more performance management meetings, permitting senior CEEdO and district officers to engage Office Chiefs, department directors, and program managers around the strategic direction and progress of their units. Use of a PowerPoint-based protocol allowing easy projection and group discussion in a collegial setting. Reflecting the centrality of a reformed PM process to her theory of central office effectiveness, CEEdO Jackson committed to attend every inaugural PM session during spring and summer 2016. Her goals in doing so were three-fold: first, to assure that all 24 departments enacted the intended process with reasonably high fidelity. Second, to personally establish the tone and focus of the PM process as a serious but collegial inquiry process, with a dual purpose of improving the unit's plan while reinforcing norms of learning and reciprocal accountability between department directors, their staffs, and CEEdO staff. And third, to gain insight into the baseline level of planning readiness present within her current senior leadership cadre in order to better gauge their capacity to begin leading PM sessions later in the year. This would help the CEEdO team to identify the most pressing needs for general and unit-specific professional learning moving into autumn 2016.

With these aims in mind, two features distinguished Dr. Jackson's PM sessions from those of the Huberman-era: they were restricted primarily to CPS professional staff with a stakeholder interest in the

plan's development and progress; and inquiry, initiated by Dr. Jackson, focused as much on the internal logic and thinking represented by the plan as it did on progress toward specific metrics. The concern was as much to continue to teach PM as an inquiry process as to ascertain whether specific goals were being achieved. Commenting on the impact of Dr. Jackson's presence in this first round of meetings, Office of Language and Cultural Education (OLCE) Chief Jorge Macias observed:

*Chief Jackson came in at the time at the first year round and she would really engage with people and she would really question, and it was good for her to be in those meetings the first year and really engage with the manager-director folks and push back because it's one thing for me to push back, people will do it because it's, I evaluate them, but I really want it done to have that external voice. And it was good that the leader of the district at the time was pushing back on them because it really caused them to then reflect and think, okay, let me work on year two and make it a little better.*

Assessing the overall success of the first round of strategic planning and collective PM learning, Dr. Jackson acknowledged the presence of stress for leaders and presenters. But for many department staff, the PM sessions were their first experiences of substantive interaction with senior CPS leaders in their areas of expertise. In one case, as Dr. Jackson recalled:

*I remember one manager said to me, I'd never had somebody at your level not only be interested in my work, but also ask me relevant questions about my work. She was just like, "I've never even talked to anybody about this at your level." So while I'm sure that people will tell you how stressful those sessions were, I think people recognize that at least the leadership understands their work and is trying to help them think about what they're doing and how to be as effective as possible.*

***Visioning as a Leadership Process: Consultation, Codification & Enculturation.*** The idea that senior leaders have a unique responsibility to envision and set the direction for an organization was familiar and important to Dr. Jackson as she entered the CEdO role, both through her own experience and her immersion in leadership literature. At the same time, she was well acquainted with the limited impact of paper vision statements on the actual work of district professionals, both in terms of their understandings of and commitment to the work, and their daily modes of administrative and instructional practice (e.g. Leithwood, 2010).<sup>16</sup> In addition, the volatility of fiscal conditions and limitations in central office strategic capacity counseled taking a more deliberate approach to developing a vision that district stakeholders would embrace and that district professionals could enact with clarity and conviction.<sup>17</sup> Thus the CEdO and her team pursued a visioning process with three clear elements: *consultation*, building stakeholder input and community engagement with district priorities; *codification*, allowing feedback and improvement of a consensus statement, and setting out a common language for improvement; and *enculturation*, or situating the vision as an organizing focus of policy, practice, and accountability.

*Consultation.* As we have seen, and as early as possible after the reorganization of central office, Dr. Jackson and her team began a concerted campaign of outreach to teachers and principals. In addition, the CEdO's meetings with central office leaders and staff around strategic planning included exercises to

<sup>16</sup> For a cogent discussion of features distinguishing the vision and mission statements of school districts more or less successful in closing persistent achievement gaps, see: Leithwood, K. (2010). *Characteristics of school districts that are exceptionally effective in closing the achievement gap*. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 9(3), 245-291.

<sup>17</sup> As Deputy Chief of Staff Eva Giglio observed of this period: "You might ask, Why did she work on the vision in her second year as CEdO? Why wasn't that the first priority as someone taking over leadership of the district? It was because it was hard to establish a path or vision for where we want to see the district to go when we were in such a crisis mode. There wasn't a lot of extra capacity from people to focus on that visionary component when just dealing with 'let's see if we can keep the doors open until the end of the school year.' The context of starting out in such crisis really dictated the work."

clarify the district’s core professional values and commitments as a common foundation for setting departmental priorities. These early central office discussions moved into a more formal process of vision inquiry and concept development (covered in the next section), and crystalized around three draft district “commitments” in the areas of academic progress, fiscal stability, and district integrity. In turn the commitments provided a structure for a second and more wide-ranging program of consultations and outreach meetings that continued from summer 2016 and into winter 2017. These included meetings with leaders of several comparable urban districts, as well as interviews with 30 non-CPS district leaders to better understand their visions for district improvement.

On the basis of these conversations, the CEo and her team embarked in autumn 2016 on a “vision tour,” a series of 8 community meetings reaching all sections of the city. Each session was broadly advertised to include parents, teachers, students, and community leaders, was held at a school or community center, and began with a presentation from CEo Jackson on the state of the district and three commitments. This was followed by an open comments period and a Q&A session to complete the evening. Each session lasted a minimum of 2 hours, and over 1000 community members participated. In general, this consultation campaign was well received by CPS constituents, creating a receptive foundation for a more complete vision document in spring 2017. In particular, the invitation to community members to address issues of district integrity signaled a systemic understanding of recent ethical failings in the district, a willingness by district leaders to own them, and a commitment to re-establishing public trust through practices of transparency, respect, and open communication.

*Codification.* Early on the CEo team understood the potential power of a common rubric or framework for articulating a shared and living language for district improvement. Indeed, for Dr. Jackson, using the design of frameworks and protocols to focus collective thinking and establish common language was a fundamental mode of leadership action.<sup>18</sup> For this reason she and her team avoided the common and tempting practice to engage an external consultant to conduct focus groups and draft a vision statement for public dissemination. Instead, they moved to codify their learning through consultation in two phases. The first phase drew primarily from within the central office academic departments to develop a succinct statement of core commitments that would help to anchor her academic leadership in the approaching 2016-2017 school year. To do this the CEo team collaborated with the academic chiefs to organize an inquiry process across several committees comprising views from every district level, with discussions closely paralleling the advent of strategic planning discussions in departments. A seven-page vision synopsis emerged from these learning cycles, which was widely disseminated for public comment in settings such as the eight “vision tour” meetings (see [Exhibit 5](#)).

In the second phase, starting in winter 2017, the central office academic departments reconvened to evaluate all feedback to the 3-page framework, and begin specifying a set of goals and associated metrics for a full three-year vision framework. Selected operations departments with missions bearing directly on school capacity (e.g. Talent for teacher recruitment; Family and Community Engagement for parent partnership) were also included in workgroups tasked with reviewing the initial three commitments, evaluating relevant research, specifying goal statements, and benchmarking and projecting performance targets against baseline metrics available in the district’s data systems. As drafts of text for each commitment emerged they were vetted further by the Teacher and Principal Advisory Councils along with senior academic chiefs. The CPS Communications team engaged a consultant to help smooth a final draft which was released to the public in April 2017.

[Exhibit 6](#) includes the final three-year vision statement, “Success Starts Here.” As one would expect from any public-facing document from a large organization, the statement’s language is upbeat and highlights a set of recent district accomplishments, particularly around student test scores and high school graduation

<sup>18</sup> See quote on page 45 (quote 39) for further elaboration of the uses of frameworks.

rates. Reflecting the Mayor's stake in CPS governance, it begins with a strong statement of support with clear political overtones. Appearing 18 months after the arrival of the new CEO and CEEdO, the text is largely forward looking, making the case that the district is building from recent successes rather than amending recent set-backs. Prominent features of this public-facing document include:

- It highlights and summarizes constituent input, both in terms of how input was gathered, how central office synthesized findings, and what specific concerns stakeholders expressed. In this sense, document invites a comparison between the policy directions and constituent concerns;
- In reasonably accessible language, it shares the research grounding for most goals, and communicates both accountability for being research-based, and respect for the audience's capacity to follow research-based arguments;
- The narrative lays out a cogent argument for the three priority commitments, keyed particularly to several compelling "core beliefs," a mission statement, and a memorable "apple" logo capturing the core beliefs as areas of district practice;
- Goals are accompanied by research-based metrics and growth projections; the increments in most cases seem ambitious but measured, and benchmarked to actual baseline data levels;
- Five primary goals and growth projections are highlighted early in the document; but each section (and especially the academic progress section) commits to specific, measurable improvements backed up by relevant metrics;
- The academic progress section is extended and detailed, and reflects careful consideration from the district's 24 academic departments
- While the "financial stability" section is written as a call to public action, the "integrity" section is written as a pledge to parents and community members to expand avenues for public input into the policy-making process, and communicate in a transparent and timely manner.

*Enculturation.* The public release of the three-year vision in April 2017, while something to celebrate, really marked the start of a more fundamental leadership challenge – to "make sure this is real," as CPS principals stressed. As Dr. Jackson put it, "...the thing I've got to do this year is make sure the vision is living and breathing." How would this be accomplished? Three features – first, CPS constituents would "see themselves" in the vision and feel that their views and concerns were fairly represented. This element of enculturation was addressed intentionally in both the consultation and codification phases of vision development. Second, constituents would evidence genuine familiarity with and grasp of the vision's concepts and commitments, and begin to hold CPS staff accountable for their ethical and performance commitments. To accomplish this, the CEEdO team modelled the practice of pushing the vision logo and brief summaries into all external and internal communications, in all public venues, and with all audiences. The CPS Communications team began playing an important role in propagating vision summaries as a ubiquitous preamble to all public messaging.

Third, and through similar means, the CEEdO team quickly and consistently highlighted the vision commitments and metrics in all meetings and engagements with academic departments, and clearly signaled the expectation that department staff would engage network and school stakeholders in a similar way. They also encouraged explicit attention to vision goals and metrics in department and network strategic plans where relevant, while the CEEdO team reviewed these plans in terms of their explicit reference to the vision goals. Finally, the vision became a key organizing theme in annual events such as the Administrators' Summit for principals in summer 2017, where Dr. Jackson personally led principals through sessions on translating the "vision to reality."

To summarize, CEEdO Jackson entered the vision development process in early 2016 with a primary intention to build broad constituent confidence that a well-conceived, research-based framework was guiding the priorities and actions of the new administration. With the support of CEO Claypool, and



employing a strategy that articulated features of consultation, codification, and enculturation, she emerged from the year-long process as a key district interlocutor with a coherent narrative about its ambitions and aims, and a strategy to renew public confidence in the competence and integrity of its leadership. For the CEEdO, and in ways similar to the parallel central office strategic planning process, the vision process, while protracted, had deepened her confidence in her grasp of the district and contemporary Chicago. This energized her own commitment to build the necessary improvement and monitoring capabilities to track annual progress against the vision's ambitious performance targets. As she put it:

*...this district is a large district and when I took on this role, one fear that I had was, how do you manage this? But I feel strongly that I know this district, I know this district inside and out. I've had every role. So that gave me an advantage and some perspective coming into this. And I designed the academic teams to work the way that they're now working. And you know, I would still say we still have a long way to go. And I'm using the performance management process to get us there and doing this vision work and talking to people from Rogers Park to the Indiana border. I know that I know the city.*

***Cultivating Reciprocal Accountability Among Senior Central Office Leaders.*** As the CEEdO's ambitious agenda for district-wide academic improvement began to find form in PM and expression in a data-informed vision, the need to advance the commitment and competencies of a senior leadership cadre also became more pressing. As she put it in 2017, "...the academic chiefs and the network chiefs, that's really my first line of defense in this role." In particular, to succeed in her role, Dr. Jackson needed to assemble and develop a senior leadership cadre with the following in mind: first, to enlist and equip her central office academic chiefs to build unit-level leadership capacity for advancing the envisioned goals through powerful PM cycles; second, to learn the relative strengths and limits of each Chief in order to challenge and support them at their next edges of growth; third, to create a community of practice among chiefs and their deputies that would expand learning around leadership practice; and fourth, to create information loops that would alert her to Chiefs' potential derailments and missteps before they devolved into crisis. Beginning in spring 2016 the CEEdO team moved on several fronts to align senior leadership development to the implementation of strategic goals and more coherent engagements with the needs of schools and their host networks.

*A cadence of weekly and monthly leadership meetings.* Earlier we reviewed the establishment of a monthly academic team meeting with a primary focus on professional learning for senior and mid-level department and program managers. We will return to the importance of this meeting for advancing the PM process in the next section. The CEEdO in turn instituted a weekly standing meeting for the 10 chief officers under her direction to advise on policy and evolve a community of practice around the work of developing other leaders. Part of the reason for convening weekly was simply to establish a rhythm of well-structured senior meetings where no such structure existed in recent memory. Rapidly, however, these hour-long sessions "...morphed more into meetings where we allow for them to do consultancies, to come in with problems of practices so that it has more of a professional learning community spin." Readings and case materials were often introduced to advance the cadre's discussion of specific problems of practice. These meetings, in turn, became the staging area for planning more specialized convenings targeted toward the development of specific practices and skills. So, for example, as the CEEdO team began work to transition Chiefs to take over leadership of PM sessions in summer 2016, the weekly chiefs meeting was used to plan a two-day working retreat to train Chiefs for that new role. The regular weekly and monthly meetings also established a foundation for Chiefs and department directors to benefit from more unique professional learning events, such as a retreat day with leadership staff of the Chicago Blackhawks professional hockey franchise. Such events helped the CEEdO further communicate her

commitment to the Chiefs' development, take senior district leaders out of their comfort zones, and push their thinking about their roles as "leaders of leaders" and developers of others' talents.<sup>19</sup>

*The bi-weekly check-in routine.* The core format of interaction between the academic chiefs and CEEdO occurred roughly every two weeks, and centered on the completion of a digital report protocol tracking developments and progress within the chief's subsidiary departments. The process was two-staged: first, each department director and program manager completed a digital protocol accounting for their unit's progress and challenges both in terms of their strategic metrics and in relation to the CEEdO's "Three Big Questions." Usually the report would highlight one strategic goal for focal attention. The CEEdO and her staff reviewed these roughly 24 reports closely both for the updates they provided, and as a preparation for her conversation with each Chief. Second, each chief reviewed their reports and came to their bi-weekly CEEdO conference prepared to discuss the overall progress of their Office. While Chiefs enjoyed some latitude to shape their reports and lead these meetings, they inevitably involved a close questioning from the CEEdO around the core elements of PM – the work's theory of action, reasons for progress or delay, and ideas for jump-starting progress in priority areas.

Developmentally the CEEdO's aims were two-fold: first, to better understand the work and the Chief's capacity to lead it; and second, to build the Chief's capacity to receive critical feedback and make sense of performance data through a collaborative and collegial exchange. Longer term, the goal was to build the Chief cadre as a circle of critical partners. As Dr. Jackson noted, "It goes back to capacity versus compliance. Even though those are uncomfortable conversations, I'd much rather have a conversation with somebody who has a strategy, has practices that they think are working and who will try to defend them with logic and data than with people who just do whatever they think I'm asking them to do." Over time, the bi-weekly check-ins became venues for more formal evaluation conferences that included "360" survey data on each Chief's and director's leadership gathered from staff within their respective units. These data provided an opportunity for both the Chief and the CEEdO to jointly make sense of their respective perceptions of the Chief's effectiveness as seen from the vantage point of staff – as Dr. Jackson put it, to "push and develop the relationship and the learning between me and the chief." While undoubtedly not all Chiefs and directors enjoyed these sessions, the CEEdO's synthesis of support and challenge in framing these data did appear to build support for their collection. As Director of External Research Sarah Dickson told us, reflecting on the "360 survey" as a departure from past practices:

*It was also, I think, a really important moment of investment...in the chiefs and directors who participated in it. Because frankly, that costs money. But it also trickled down. I know my director now really is suggesting it as a part of the budget moving forward because he found it so valuable for his feedback that he wants to...create the space for it.*

***Performance Management Phase II: Building an Infrastructure for Continuous Improvement.*** In summer 2016, with a vision process underway, structures for senior leadership development evolving, and a first round of performance management sessions completed, the CEEdO team began preparations to conduct a full academic year of strategic planning and progress monitoring among academic departments. The pilot round of 24 strategic plans provided plenty of data for interrogating both the efficacy of the inaugural tools as well as the initial understanding levels among Chiefs and department directors. Upon

<sup>19</sup> Thinking back on the unique impact of the Blackhawks leadership retreat, Dr. Jackson reflected: "The other thing that I hope people got out of it is that we saw a lot of different leadership styles. And from a leadership perspective, I don't think anybody walked out of there not recognizing that it is his vision and it's clear and he's been able to get people to buy in. But there were also people who were flexible, anything goes, I make it work. And then there were people who were no nonsense and you were afraid to breathe, you know? So I think people saw that this organization is working and that it takes all different types of people and leaders. So even though most of the leaders there are white males, they were very different in style if you were paying attention. They all had a very different way of approaching leadership. It was probably one of the best professional development experiences we had as a team."

reviewing the strategic plans and notes from the corresponding PM sessions, two primary limits in the process were evident.

First, the majority of plans attempted to respond to the CEEdO's directive to think through program priorities in terms of how they enabled principals and teachers to advance powerful teaching. They were less attentive to data that would help distinguish which schools and student sub-groups most needed the constrained resources available to the district in 2016. Second, the plans and PM sessions revealed that department teams were not conducting effective "gap analyses" and "root cause analyses" (RCA) associated with the problems (or "situations") they were attempting to improve. Instead, and in part reflecting the CEEdO's expressed sense of urgency<sup>20</sup>, the pilot strategic planning tool asked teams to frame the current obstacles with minimum analysis of deeper underlying problems that would need to be accounted for in order to propose a valid theory of action and actionable implementation goals. This resulted in strategic plans with logic models that often ignored serious obstacles to implementation, and lacked the benefits of inquiry into why ceilings on progress were difficult to overcome.

To address these limitations, the CEEdO team engaged Dr. Shelby Cosner<sup>21</sup> of the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), an expert in the organization of inquiry cycles at both the school and district levels, to design and lead a program of monthly professional learning (PL) for academic chiefs and department directors. The venue for learning was the monthly academic team meeting, with additional discussion and monitoring of progress conducted by Chiefs in their weekly meetings. Three features of these monthly sessions stand out as consequential for the next phase of PM evolution, particularly as it bore on central office alignment to school needs. First, because Dr. Cosner had been Dr. Jackson's instructor and mentor during her doctoral studies at UIC, the two shared a common vocabulary and experience base for diagnosing issues with continuous improvement processes and strategies. As a result, the year of sessions served to orient CPS academic department leaders to the language of contemporary performance management as a basis for professional community among these leaders. Second, after engaging the CEEdO team around a joint review of the pilot strategic plans, Dr. Cosner agreed that providing a practical grounding in RCA would strengthen the capacity of department teams to better target theories of action to the instructional core. Further, Dr. Cosner recommended concentrating the PL sessions on RCA development and problem identification, and resisting the temptation to diffuse PL time across a wider range of topics. As Dr. Jackson recalled, "You know, usually PD, you're just skipping around... This thing came up and I've really been disciplined, like let's just stay on this topic. Let's really get good."

Third, the engagement with Dr. Cosner accelerated tool development and the integration of RCA into a more inquiry-focused strategic planning process. [Exhibit 7](#) displays the format for the Data Inquiry Root Cause Analysis (RCA) protocol, as one example. This was used to support department teams in a sequenced process of RCA, maintaining continuity across several team check-ins and tracking evolving action items bearing on implementation goals. The protocol lists prior action items addressed to a particular topic or strategic priority. A data review is reported listing evidence of success and well as concerns around the priority. The teams then embark on a data-informed "brainstorm" of possible explanations of the current data pattern, accenting evidence supporting the presence of the cause and an assessment of whether addressing the problem is "within the team's sphere of control," and therefore more actionable by the team. Based on the RCA, a next set of action steps is projected and staff are tasked

<sup>20</sup> As Dr. Jackson reflected in 2017, "That was a missed opportunity. There wasn't any professional development or high expectations around root cause analysis. It was a very small section of the document and I didn't push on it in the PM session either. Even I was going straight to, "the data says this, what are you going to do about it?" Something was missing in the conversation because people were just trying to solve the problem and you know, get me off their back."

<sup>21</sup> We note that in 2016-2017 Dr. Cosner was a faculty member in the UIC College of Education and a faculty affiliate of the UIC Center for Urban Education Leadership (CUEL), the publisher of this case study. In December 2018 Dr. Cosner became Executive Director of CUEL. In that capacity she has overseen Dr. Whalen in the development and writing of this case study, but has not contributed directly to its research or composition.

with tracking further progress. By mid-fall 2016, in turn, protocols like the RCA data inquiry were informing version two of the strategic planning template (see [Exhibit 8, slide 3](#)). Now, the first step in specifying a strategic priority was to state the current or baseline “situation” with corresponding quantitative indicators, and support from research literature for the situation statement. RCA results are then reported in a table, with the expectation of explicit alignment between the RCA and the language of each strategic priority – as the protocol directs, “Address Root Causes in Strategic Priorities.”

Several Chiefs and department directors we spoke with experienced the impact of this early PM professional learning as both helpful technically and impactful in terms of their leadership. One veteran Chief discussed how the structuring of the Cosner PL sessions positioned him to reinforce questions of coherence in his own strategic planning discussions.

*Dr. Cosner was coming in to do a lot of training with us...And we would take our leaders within our office to those trainings and do some of our group work there. And then off of those meetings we come back together and say, look, this was the learning. Do you see the connection between what they're trying to tell us and how we have some type of impact on schools? Do you see that sometimes the work we do doesn't necessarily implement, doesn't necessarily impact the classroom, but it indirectly impacts the classroom? And how do we do that?*

For LaTanya McDade, Chief of Teaching and Learning under CEEdO Jackson, the trainings drove home the importance of calibrating and monitoring the learning demands on staff in relation to their current knowledge in anticipating the likely pace of staff learning and turnaround to practice.

*It was a jarring moment for me because I started to think how much I've been engaging them in continuous improvement. They've completed their strategic plans; they've done their beginning of the year cycles. I'm having touch points with them and progress monitoring But then Shelby Cosner was in the back of my head saying, learning demands, learning demands, learning demands. Are you addressing those? What have you done? And I started to question myself. Did I make some big assumptions about where people are in the learning process? And just because people speak the language or sound like they understand and even if they execute on it, that doesn't always mean that those gaps aren't there. You still have to find those and you have to address those.*

While the CEEdO team made effective use of external resources for professional learning, they focused also on building internal capacity both to support PM analytic processes and to accelerate PM quality through close monitoring of department implementation. Two factors abetted the development of internal support capacity for PM during the CEEdO period. First, although PM practices had fallen into dis-use within central office since Ron Huberman’s departure in 2010, there remained among senior central office leaders several champions of PM who actively advanced continuous improvement practices within their units. Particularly notable in this regard was Denise Little, founding Chief of the Office of Network Support (ONS), who continued to cultivate strategic planning and quarterly PM review practices among Network Chiefs, including Janice Jackson, and developed PM design and support competencies among her core staffers. Experience with the design and implementation of PM data practices could also be found in several CPS central office departments. Several of these staffers, including Chief Little, became key resources and allies to Dr. Jackson, and eventually to central office colleagues, as she assembled early staff expertise in PM protocol design and support.

The second factor involved the existence of a well-developed data infrastructure and data-related professional capacity at CPS as Dr. Jackson entered the CEEdO role. From at least the time of the Duncan administration, CPS had become a recognized national leader in the development and monitoring of leading and lagging indicators of student learning and success, particularly at the high school level.

Noteworthy was the development of the “freshman-on-track” metric in collaboration with the UChicago Consortium on School Research (or, the Consortium) in the late 1990’s, which provided a potent and research validated tool for monitoring the progress of 9<sup>th</sup> graders toward graduation. The Consortium partnership in turn helped to catalyze the on-going improvement of data dashboards and tracking systems available to school principals and network chiefs through the 2000’s, while CPS built a core of departments with a strong professional commitment to fostering data-informed decision-making.

Given the importance of data systems to compliance with NCLB reporting requirements, frequent reorganization was the norm for these departments, and several transitions were underway when Dr. Jackson became CEo. Because key departments such as School Quality Measurement (SQM) reported to the CEo, Dr. Jackson was in position to reorganize SQM over two years, and using PM structures, to address the data support of central office PM processes along with the monitoring of PM design and implementation quality. In spring 2016, SQM’s first strategic plan included a priority to “Develop consistent practices across CEo offices for accessing, interpreting, and using performance data to monitor progress and evaluate success.” By autumn 2017, the Department of School Quality Management and Research (SQMR) had been configured to align external partners like CCSR with the district’s school quality monitoring system and PM quality at all district levels. With new leadership and staff dedicated to PM support, the department’s “strategic priority 4,” now read: “Support CEo Performance Management process with analysis and consultation on process, KPIs, goal-setting, and monitoring. Manage district efforts for continuous improvement across Academic offices, Networks, and Schools.”

One further important step to accelerate the rooting of PM practices across academic departments involved the creation of a dedicated staff position within SQMR to lead PM research and development activities in early spring 2017. Jacare Thomas came to CPS in 2008 and joined the performance management design team under CEO Ron Huberman. This experience impressed him with the ways that good intentions around collective professional learning can be undercut by too narrow a focus on moving specific high-stakes metrics. In 2009 he was assigned to support Denise Little’s strategic planning initiative among Network Chiefs (NCs) as a senior data strategist, where he helped develop a quarterly “peer review” process, “...the first time that we started building network communities of continuous improvement.” These conversations included more opportunities for network members to pose and probe problems of NC practice within a context of school data patterns. This also acquainted him with Dr. Jackson in her NC role in 2014, a period when Mr. Thomas also was completing a Masters Degree in predictive analytics at Northwestern University. Thus when the need became clearer to CEo Jackson to build a “meta” improvement cycle around her fledgling central office PM routines, Mr. Thomas seemed particularly well suited, both in experience and temperament. Not only was his expertise and historical perspective respected by senior peers, but he was trusted as a fair broker of the CEo’s professed intentions to lead the PM process developmentally rather than punitively. As she put it, “His personality is just not threatening. And so even though people know that this is a management strategy, they trust that it is being used to improve the process.”

The creation of a dedicated performance management support role would advance three discrete functions related to the CEo’s PM strategy and its broader relationship to district instructional coherence. First, and most immediately pressing, the CEo initiated an audit of PM strategic planning quality across the academic departments using a mixed methodology of interviews, PM session observations, and a rubric to quantify functionality across departments in different facets of “version 2” of the plan. The CEo Team utilized the resulting report, issued in June 2017, in Chief weekly meetings and monthly academic team convenings to advance professional learning around strategic planning as well as improve the format of the SY 2018 PM format. Second, and following from the report recommendations, a set of training modules and support protocols would be developed that covered every aspect of PM implementation. This resulted in an accelerated development of professional learning and quality monitoring materials by Fall 2017, with particular attention to inducting new staff into the emerging continuous improvement

culture and terminology quickly and effectively. Third, Mr. Thomas also was assigned the somewhat lapsed work of further developing the school-level strategic plan, the Continuous Improvement Work Plan (or CIWP). While his primary role was to pursue improvements in the functionality of the CIWP at the school level, his understanding of district coherence issues quickly led him to advocate for developing stronger technical connective tissue between central office and network strategic plans and the support needs of individual schools as reflected in their CIWPs.

Where had PM and continuous improvement capacity arrived under CEEdO Jackson by Fall 2017? In terms of enculturation, several signs pointed to a dissipation of initial anxiety about the intentions behind PM, and a rising embrace of continuous improvement (CI) as a pervasive way of working at the central office level, at least among senior leaders. In fact, and due to both internal and external influences, the CEEdO team was preparing to re-brand PM as CI across all levels of the system, as it continued to draw more professional learning material from Improvement Science and the continuous improvement literature (e.g., Davenport, 2006; Curtis & City, 2009; Bryk et al., 2015). And annual strategic plans were evidencing more sophistication in terms of marshalling baseline data to describe the current situations and benchmark data targets. As OLCE Chief Jorge Macias saw it, this progress reflected both patience, presence, and consistent messaging on the CEEdO's part:

*She was a great leader in keeping a poker face about probably the resistance she was getting. And continuously staying on message about why we were doing this. I think her ability to bring in Dr. Cosner, bringing in other partners to continuously talk about this work. I think that it stayed year two, that it stayed year three, it got people around to thinking, okay, this is real. We need to think about engaging in this. This is not about losing my job, this is about getting better...I think the culture required patience and she was smart enough to be patient and stick to it.*

In terms of consistency of implementation, June 2017 PM evaluation report provides a partial but useful portrait of strengths and challenges (see [Exhibit 9](#)). Using a five-point rating of “Data Inquiry Maturity,” the report ranked each academic department in four PM functions: a) the situation statement; b) the analysis of root causes; c) theory of action; and d) quality of goals and milestones.<sup>22</sup> The analysis found wide variations in the levels of data reasoning and sophistication across departments, noting that roughly one-third rated below “3,” indicating “DI processes implemented throughout department with root cause analysis and action items.” This was consistent with the report’s more qualitative “gap analysis” which suggested that PM goal-setting and conversations tended to exclude junior staff from participation, while strategic goal monitoring activities were not integrated into the routine schedule of department team meetings. Thus, while continuous improvement thinking had established a beachhead in the work processes of department and office leaders, it remained a somewhat more peripheral influence on the daily work of central office line staff in many departments.

***Building Coherence at the Middle Level of School Supervision.*** Recent years have seen increased attention to the challenges associated in devising intermediate levels of principal supervision and networked school supports that effectively advance instructional coherence in large urban districts (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Honig & Rainey, 2019). Research has focused particularly on shifting practices of principal supervision away from compliance monitoring and operational supports – roles driven hard by high stakes accountability regimes like NCLB – and toward the support and development of principals as instructional leaders (Goldring et al., 2018). Effecting this shift has been framed primarily as a learning challenge, involving the mindsets and supervisory repertoires of both principal supervisors and the central office leaders who employ and support them. Honig & Rainey (2019), drawing upon situated learning theory, have identified the pervasive importance of taking a “teaching and learning approach” to

<sup>22</sup> For a helpful review of the KPI Institute’s “Five Levels of Organizational Maturity” framework, see: <https://www.performancemagazine.org/five-levels-of-organizational-maturity-performance-management-perspective/>.

supervision at all levels, defined as “consistently using particular strategies that are characteristic of high quality teachers and mentors across various apprenticeship settings” (p. 446). This implies the deepening of knowledge around instructional coherence; elaborating skills of direct interaction and feedback with supervisees; acquiring design competencies around networked peer learning; and developing self-organization skills involved in maximizing time available for supervisory coaching. Such learning can be even more challenging to sustain in large urban districts, as pressure mounts to engage principal supervisors in a wide range of bridging and brokering activities not directly aligned to schools’ instructional improvement needs (Panero & Talbert, 2013; Thessin, 2019).

In Chicago, crafting an effective middle level of school supervision had been a focus of intensive investment and innovation for almost two decades following the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001. This started with the establishment of Area Instructional Offices in 2002, and transitioned to the current Network structures in summer 2013 (Elmore, Grossman & King, 2007). In that time many of Chicago’s most successful and dynamic principals were recruited into Area and Network Chief (NC) roles with the aim of differentiating instructional supports for schools struggling to meet high stakes accountability demands. In the same period CPS built and adapted a stable and well-regulated administrative infrastructure for recruiting, selecting, and convening Chiefs for common orientations and trainings. By the time of Dr. Jackson’s arrival as CEEdO, the Office of Network Supports (ONS) was managing clear systems and structures for monitoring the academic progress of schools within each network as well as each Chief’s network management practices. Chiefs were meeting regularly with their principals, individually and collectively, to keep key district initiatives on-track and conduct professional development, and were supervising teams of Instructional Support Leaders and other network support staff engaged in school support. And as we’ve seen, ONS leadership were sustaining key practices of data-informed performance management when such practices had otherwise waned across central office.

At the same time, the challenges confronting ONS in 2015 in terms of preparing Network Chiefs to develop principals’ instructional leadership skills remained daunting. To begin, the professional knowledge base of both instructional leadership development and principal supervision was unfamiliar to most CPS Network Chiefs in 2015, while recent ONS professional learning for NCs had favored teacher instructional development. Considerable new learning was implied in shifting Chief practice toward principal development, and time to learn and practice new coaching and mentoring skills was at a premium. And this new learning had to compete with other informational imperatives in the limited collective learning time available to ONS. In the field, Network offices were lightly staffed, leaving NCs chronically pressed to keep pace with school-level emergencies, school visits and evaluation conferences, professional development for principals, and the on-going process of hiring and placing new principals in a context of high annual leadership turnover. Add to this the ubiquitous pressure on Network Chiefs to account for the academic performance of their constituent schools, and the temptation for NCs to emphasize compliance over development in their interactions with principals could be overwhelming. Finally, the district’s lack of a unified and authoritative instructional framework further inhibited the efforts of NCs to anchor their coaching efforts with principals in a consensus account of teaching excellence. Together these challenges translated into high annual rates of annual turnover among Network Chiefs.<sup>23</sup>

As a recent principal and Network Chief (NC) in CPS, Dr. Jackson was well acquainted with the pressures facing Network Chiefs and the challenges facing ONS. Thus her entry plan emphasized partnering with the Office of Network Supports (ONS) to devise a new program of professional learning for NCs that would enhance their opportunities to learn within an effective and supportive professional

<sup>23</sup> Dr. Steven Tozer of UIC, while conducting PD with CPS Network Chiefs in SY 2016, polled NCs to gauge levels of NC turnover in the prior three years, yielding a turnover count of 31 Chiefs or deputies in that time period. (Personal communication, December 2020).

learning community (PLC). In addition, ONS moved quickly to adjust its performance management structure to align it more closely paralleled the strategic planning and monitoring cadence moving forward among central office departments. Subsequent review and analysis of the pilot NC strategic plans yielded similar patterns to the findings among central office plans. As Dr. Jackson reflected in spring 2017: “Some Network Chiefs really did a good job with their strategic planning. It’s clear, it’s thoughtful. It’s apparent that this is how they organize themselves in their networks. But still, I would say more than half did it for compliance. That’s where we are.” Further, ONS was tasked with devising an improved annual evaluation process for NCs that would align their assessments more closely with the development of school administrators as instructional leaders, and reflect a clearer set of NC practice competencies. This evaluation framework, first circulated in late autumn 2015, was a launching point for a more concerted effort to organize ONS and equip individual NC’s to improve their practice over the ensuing years, and build a more robust and reliable talent pipeline for NC positions.

A revealing window into both the challenges posed by NC development and the progress achieved in the CEo period is provided by the three ONS strategic plans from spring 2016 through spring 2018. Like other central office units, ONS was required to engage in the new strategic planning process using the template continuous improvement protocols reviewed earlier. The inaugural ONS strategic plan in spring 2016 (redacted version; see [Exhibit 10](#)) was similar in its scope and level of elaboration to most central office plans, with four strategic priorities: 1) K-2 (increasing reading proficiency in grades K-2); 2) high school strategy (engaging NCs, their deputies, and school staff in a coordinated push to increase high school graduation rates; 3) CCSS (ensuring 100% student access to curricula aligned to the Common Core State Standards); and 4) Attendance (driving an increase in every school’s attendance rates beyond SY 2015 levels). While the implementation goals attached to these objectives do include mention of training for NCs to meet these goals, there are no impact metrics gauging the delivery of this training or increases in NC skill or proficiency. Instead, all impact goals bear on school performance and student learning measures (e.g. average increases in attendance; mean increases in high school ACT scores). Thus the plan appears to engage Dr. Jackson’s “Three Big Questions,” and broadly commits to background PD for NCs in areas like literacy instruction. But it is agnostic toward the practices of engagement with school leaders that Chiefs would or should deploy to impact its priority metrics.

For Dr. Jackson, the lack of a clear and potent professional learning (PL) agenda in tandem with pressures on NCs to engage in district activities beyond their core mission elevated her urgency to both buffer their time and revisit PL quality. To do this she took several steps. First, she convened the Chief and staff of ONS team in weekly meetings to develop a tighter sequence of data-driven professional learning sessions in the mode of a professional learning community. The goal was to break the pattern of presenting to NCs with little accountability on their part for active learning around their network data, and increase NC experience with presenting performance data from their Network schools and sharing sense-making with their colleagues – activities routinely expected of principals in PM sessions. To support this shift, Dr. Jackson herself contributed expertise to these sessions in areas like managing data-informed inquiry cycles. And she engaged Dr. Shelby Cosner over a two-year period to orient NCs to the same strategic planning and PM practices expected of central office units, including root cause analysis, gap analysis, and the management of continuous improvement cycles. On a parallel track, Dr. Jackson also recruited Dr. Steven Tozer of the UIC Center for Urban Education Leadership to begin inducting NCs into the national conversation about principal supervision, keyed to the shift from compliance monitoring to instructional leadership coaching. This included orientation to the “Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards” recently published by the Council of Chief State School Officers, as well as opportunities to discuss school networking strategies with high profile superintendents and specialists in educational improvement science (CCSSO, 2015).

A second track for professional learning for Network Chiefs was integrated into another of CEo Jackson’s priority initiatives, the High School Strategy (for overview, see [Exhibit 11](#)). In her first meeting



in fall 2015 with NCs, Dr. Jackson focused her remarks on the primacy of the Instructional Core as an organizing focus for NC practice. From there she fast-tracked the organizing of a series of high school visits that would include instructional rounds and debrief discussions with principals, their Network Chiefs, and the CEEdO staff, to communicate the priority she placed on elevating NC capacity to engage school staff members in collegial cycles of inquiry around instructional improvement. High schools were a particular concern for Dr. Jackson, of course, given her personal experience with high school improvement and her awareness that student achievement at the secondary level had remained relatively flat in CPS for several years. In addition, though, the current CPS network model assigned the district's high schools roughly evenly across all networks. High schools thus afforded the CEEdO a manageable scale for engaging all NCs in the practices of instructional "rounding" as an entry point for engaging principals and teacher teams in instructional and curricular discussions grounded solidly in Common Core standards and measures of curricular rigor. These procedures could be expanded later to use in elementary settings (City et al., 2009; Meyer-Looze, 2015).

[Exhibit 12](#) includes an example of an "Instructional Core Walk" (ICW) protocol, the focal organizing structure for these high school visits in SY 2016 and SY 2017. Over three years this protocol was elaborated to include more alignment to Common Core, so that it became the primary audit tool for principals and teachers to assess their progress toward goals in their school's Continuous Improvement Work Plan (CIWP). But the primary features of the process remained stable from late 2015 forward. The Network Chief was responsible for engaging each high school in preparing the instructional core description around three "CIA" elements: curricular rigor; instructional approaches; and assessment strategies. A day would then be scheduled for a team of observers – often including the CEEdO and ONS Chief – to participate in a 3-4 hour working session around the ICW protocol.

The session would begin with an orientation to the CIA assessment, followed by observation of a series of classrooms using a shared assessment rubric, and reconvening to debrief around a comparison of the CIA description and the results of the classroom walks. Chiefs and ONS staff would facilitate the debrief, providing ample opportunities for the CEEdO and ONS staff to observe each NC as a coach-facilitator of a data-driven improvement conversation with a district principal. Detailed notes of CEEdO feedback to NCs and ONS staff would be included in summary reports of each session that she attended – a total of 12 in SY 2017. The notes are organized around "warm" and "cool" feedback to NCs, with detailed remarks regarding the specific school's level of instructional organization – what they should be noticing<sup>24</sup> – as well as the NC's practice moves to build reciprocal accountability with school leaders through data-focused, appreciative, and improvement-focused feedback (for examples of CEEdO feedback, see [Exhibit 13](#)). Summarizing her encouragement at the emerging quality of these visits, Dr. Jackson reflected in late 2017: "I feel like the quality of the conversations has improved, meaning the conversation has been elevated and I've gotten follow-up emails from principals about the walks and they will say that they have been impressed by the dialogue. They've never had a walkthrough like this. Chiefs are saying the same thing. So, I'm going to push. That's just what I do. But I'm a teacher and so I'm always thinking, did people learn as a result of this?" As suggested earlier, this description of the work echoes what Honig & Rainey (2019) characterize as a "teaching and learning approach."

<sup>24</sup> Dr. Jackson brought deep expertise around rigor and alignment high school curricula to these conversations, with a goal to sharpen the eyes of ONS staff and NCs to patterns of curricular dysfunction. As she described it, "We're using a framework for the instructional core effectiveness walks. We want to see the connection between curriculum and the written curriculum, instruction and the taught curriculum, and assessment and the assessed curriculum. We want to see how those things are linked. You typically find that schools like to talk about instruction. They like to come up with a target instructional area. They like to talk about instructional strategies. People do not often have a documented curriculum that is fully aligned both horizontally and vertically. What typically happens is you've got good people putting stuff together with their best efforts, but if you really laid everything out from beginning of the year to end of the year, ninth grade through 12th grade, you end up seeing a bunch of overlap in that progression and that rigor over time is not happening."

A third and complementary approach to professional learning involved developing cross-functional relationships between central office and network staff in joint learning contexts. “Academic fairs” for central office and network leaders, for example, emerged from feedback from principals and teachers in 2016 lamenting the lack of network expertise in key curricular areas such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) or personalized learning. In response the CEEdO team charged the Chiefs of ONS, Teaching and Learning, and other academic units to design quarterly “academic fairs” convening central office and network teams in collaborative learning around pressing instructional core topics. The day-long events featured expert presentations for central office and network staff in sessions sufficiently small to permit sustained discussions and meaningful networking. Panels of teachers and principals provided frank perspectives on school-level implementation challenges.<sup>25</sup> Another example, associated with the High School Strategy - each network gathered its high school principals together with key central office chiefs and department heads to provide a comprehensive orientation to the initiative’s key features. As hosts of these meetings, each NC gained experience in bridging and brokering connections between district officers and their constituent principals, while also learning in detail the range of resources available to networks through central office departments.

The convergence of these and related professional learning opportunities for NC’s is reflected in the evolving priorities of ONS strategic plans during the CEEdO period. While the inaugural 2016 plan was not explicit about NC development, the third strategic priority of the SY 2017 plan now focused on “Chief Support,” framed as providing “...*professional development and coaching to Chiefs to support them in accomplishing the impact goals identified in their strategic plans*” (see [Exhibit 14](#)). ONS supports include training and guidance in the design and execution of strategic plans; regular NC check-in meetings with ONS leaders around development goals keyed to a new set of Chief Competencies; and support in visiting at least one “priority school” with the ONS chief for coaching in the principal support process. By the SY 2018 ONS strategic plan, “Chief Support” is now priority #1, and framed as providing “*differentiated support to Chiefs and Deputy Chiefs in order to ensure they have the leadership skills and resources needed to support their schools in achieving their academic goals in all of their schools*” (see [Exhibit 15](#)). Measures of NC compliance with evaluation and PD expectations still predominate over the development of measures of ONS staff proficiency in supporting building NC coaching or supervisory capacity. But the ONS plan does prioritize the development of resources for NC’s to better understand and practice principal supervision competencies, based on a shared CPS Network Chief practice competency document. Nothing close to such resources were available in autumn 2015.

While professional learning for NCs remained a pressing priority, more discerning means of identifying and selecting NCs were also needed. Both her own experience and a network chief and the struggle to improve NC quality had made clearer to the CEEdO that the skills and dispositions of the CPS principalship were not necessarily sufficient to establishing effective reciprocal accountability within a cadre of networked school principals. Greater selectivity in identifying NC candidates was further warranted by the relatively high annual turnover rate among NCs, due in part to promotion to central office leadership, but equally to the multiple demands of the NC role. These concerns were addressed through several avenues.

First, the CEEdO team coordinated with ONS to more systematically identify promising principals for consideration as NCs. As CEEdO, Dr. Jackson annually engaged those deemed highly promising through school visits and one-to-one conversations.<sup>26</sup> Second, and following the approach already applied to

<sup>25</sup> Recalling one teacher panel, Deputy Chief of Staff Eva Giglio noted: “People still quote one teacher who said, “I feel like I serve two masters” because he works in an IB school and felt like he had to serve the network and then serve the IB team. That was so powerful to hear. It really helped people realize how their work was truly disconnected from what schools needed and rethink the way they approach schools.”

<sup>26</sup> As Dr. Jackson recalled in 2017, “Early on, we were talking about the chief quality issue and realized that we need to start identifying people early. We pulled the list of all the sitting principals and started having informal meetings with people, whether

determining eligibility for the principalship by the ONS Principal Quality department earlier in the decade, the ONS team devised a multi-step screening and practice-focused interview process. This included a preliminary interview with candidates ([Exhibit 16](#)), review of a professional portfolio and NC recommendations, and a further interview focused on each candidate’s data analysis sophistication keyed to metrics from a large set of schools (see [Exhibit 17](#)). From the CEEdO’s perspective, the resulting interviews for SY 2017, in which the CEEdO participated personally, increased her confidence in the quality of incoming NCs, and more clearly revealed limitations among candidates that should preclude their selection. Just as vitally the process revealed “edges of growth” among unsuccessful candidates that could be developed through an intentional process in order to prepare promising candidates for future selection. This approach to talent development, along with an effort to fill deputy NC positions, was calculated to yield a deeper bench of well-prepared candidates at the network level.

### **Summarizing the CEEdO Period – Founding an Institutional Transformation**

Over an intensive two-and-one-half year period beginning in fall 2015, and taking a strong and adaptive learner’s stance, CEEdO Jackson built a capable leadership team to execute a program of organizational development that foregrounded the advancement of instructional coherence, and drew deeply on the literatures of school and district improvement (e.g. Senge 1990; Elmore 2004; Waters & Marzano, 2009; Leithwood, 2013; Honig, 2013). As of fall 2017 there remained a wide variance in the embrace and uptake of specific strategic planning and continuous improvement practices by central office leaders. And systems to align and integrate the service provision strategies of central office departments to network and school needs were not sufficiently robust. Yet with some help from an improving budgetary situation, professional morale and confidence in December 2017 had improved markedly from the low point in winter 2016, while public confidence in district leadership was on the rise. The leading elements of the CEEdO’s program of district academic revitalization included:

- Reconceiving and restructuring a diminished capacity for performance management by reframing strategic planning and data monitoring practices within a collective ethos of continuous improvement and on-going professional learning;
- Designing and improving an annual cadence of strategic planning and progress monitoring structures, routines, and tools *across all academic departments* that enacted and normalized thoughtful analyses of the systemic causes of impediments to progress as a firmer foundation for theorizing paths of action, department goal-setting and the development of implementation strategies;
- “Flipping the script” on the traditional culture of district power relations by reframing service to schools in both moral and strategic terms, and tasking central office and network leaders to demonstrate in their theories of action the effective alignment and differentiation of unit services to school improvement needs;
- Enacting a “vision process” both around and within district levels to establish public accountability to ambitious, data-based improvement goals, and to anchor improvement efforts across district levels more coherently in a shared set of ambitious but attainable public principles and commitments;
- Building a program of collective and job-embedded professional learning experiences intended to grow skills, expertise, and dispositions associated with effective continuous improvement practice, with particular attention to leading and cultivating that practice among junior central office and network staff;
- Nurturing a culture of reciprocal accountability, intellectual challenge, and practice improvement among central office and network senior leaders, in which summative evaluation processes are nested within senior leaders’ commitment to provide resources and targeted feedback to improve leadership performance;

it was me prioritizing visiting their school to see them in action, having one-on-ones with them to let them know I value their work, et cetera. Just to start building up that pipeline.”

- Beginning to strengthen connective tissue linking central office departments, network offices, and individual schools – including data systems, communication links, bridging roles, and advisory councils for principals, teachers, parents, and students – to realize the central office goal to differentiate services more effectively to meet varied school needs.

One interesting initiative of the CEEdO period that illustrates the convergence of these leadership initiatives around significant problems of equity and excellence at scale is the development and implementation of GoCPS. For at least 10 years prior to 2018 CPS had struggled to design an on-line universal application process that would provide all parents and students with the same knowledge base around school choice, and significantly reduce applicant advantages due to social capital, general familiarity with application processes, or connections within specific CPS schools. As it was, the current system required families to apply separately to schools of interest, navigate a wide range of application protocols, and face the possibility of being put on multiple waiting lists with no other option than the neighborhood high school. The same “non-system system” left many high schools under-enrolled and uncertain about enrollment until late into the summer. As Dr. Jackson said of the status quo, “We cannot have a system that allows some people to feel that they can access it with ease, while others feel like it’s too complicated and choose to disengage.”<sup>27</sup> But technical challenges as well as the resistance of charter organizations to relinquishing autonomy over their admissions processes had frustrated attempts to shift to a universal, one-stop admissions system.

The design and development of GoCPS as a response to this challenge incorporates several signature features of emerging “enterprise-level” problem solving capacity in the CEEdO period. To begin, the CEEdO elected to prioritize this problem as a strategic response to a big picture “existential” problem, namely the chronic drop in overall student enrollment in recent years. While issues of equity were intrinsically important to address, they also had a corrosive effect on the willingness of minority Chicagoans to remain engaged with CPS. Second, GoCPS reflected the CEEdO’s tendency as a systems thinker to meld technology with stakeholder engagement to create systems well gauged to specific problems and susceptible to improvement. As she put it in 2018 regarding “...problems that seem intractable or hard to address...I like to put a system in place that engages, that leverages technology, engages people...even if we don't fix the problem, we are set on a path to start to fix the problem.”

Third, the CEEdO and her team reached across the academic and operational sides of the organization to assemble an effective design team with the necessary data sources and expertise to thoroughly map the problem space and design with parents as end-users in mind. In partnership with an external vendor, the central office chiefs of Information Technology Services, Access and Enrollment, Procurement and Communications collaborated effectively to implement a beta-tested system in time for a smooth fall 2017 roll-out. Fourth, the district mounted a vigorous and diversified public media campaign to advertise the new system and its advantages for Chicago families and students. The resulting system effectively engaged 92% of all eligible 8<sup>th</sup> graders, while over 80% of applicants were placed in one of their top 3 choices. Finally, the district engaged the UChicago Consortium to mine data from the first year of implementation. For the first time, the district had a comprehensive data set by which to understand patterns of school choice and their correlates, and begin to identify patterns of over- and under-subscription to schools in every neighborhood across the city. In sum, the relatively seamless debut of GoCPS in 2017 reflected deepened capacity for the sort of strategic planning, collaborative design, and implementation monitoring that signal the emergence of a nascent but increasingly sure-footed culture of continuous improvement within the central office.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Barrow, L., & Sartain, L. (2019). GoCPS: A First Look at Ninth-Grade Applications, Offers, and Enrollment. Research Report. UChicago Consortium on School Research, p. 1.

## The Transition to CEO: Scaling Continuous Improvement Across the Organization

In December 2017 CEEdO Janice Jackson was promoted by Mayor Rahm Emanuel to the position of Chief Executive Officer on the heels of a scandal implicating CEO Forrest Claypool.<sup>28</sup> Her availability to take up the CEO position was highly fortunate for CPS. Over two-and-one-half years as CEEdO she had established herself as both the visionary and architect behind a vigorous shift in district professional culture and capacity. That shift emphasized greater responsiveness to public concerns about district integrity and decision-making, and clearer alignment of central office and network practices and priorities to bolster the instructional core. Moreover, Dr. Jackson's long-standing concerns around resource and pedagogical equity were moving steadily and more prominently to the foreground of her explicit policy agenda. In this regard, and stemming in part from the sustained advocacy work of the "20 for 20" Campaign,<sup>29</sup> a fortunate breakthrough was achieved in autumn 2017 around state funding levels for Chicago public schools. This meant significantly enhanced resources for neighborhood schools and targeted administrative services in the coming school year.<sup>30</sup> And freshly released data from Stanford researcher Sean Reardon had documented the surprising success of CPS classrooms in educating children of color when compared with suburban Illinois districts and most large urban districts across the country.<sup>31</sup> While the data analyzed by Reardon preceded her time as CEEdO, the exciting findings were cause for celebration and consistent with continued improvements in leading and lagging student achievement trends under Dr. Jackson's watch. These developments further reinforced a growing and hard-won sense of optimism among CPS staff that footholds on long intransigent challenges of equity and excellence could be secured, and that Dr. Jackson was the right leader at the right moment to extend a nascent culture of continuous improvement from the academic departments into the entire organization.

***Engaging Strategically and Tactically.*** It would be difficult to imagine a second-in-command better prepared to take on the challenges of the modern CEO-ship than Dr. Janice Jackson at the outset of 2018. Becoming CEEdO in the midst of a severe fiscal crisis in 2015 had been bracing and stressful. But it had also provided a front-row seat and a comprehensive tutorial to everything in district leadership from budget management and political communication to Board relations, talent pipeline development, and procurement and transportation systems. Taking advantage of the expertise around her, she did not hesitate to recruit colleagues as tutors and mentors, and read intensively when possible in areas outside her experience, and particularly in district finance and politics.<sup>32</sup> Further, she had enjoyed wide autonomy over the redesign and re-culturing of the district's core academic practices – entailing multi-million dollar management decisions – and had situated the academic departments in the vanguard of her vision to align all district support functions in the service of the instructional core. In the process she had built a leadership bench on CPS' academic side to drive her coherence-focused agenda under her system leadership. On a personal level she enjoyed broad respect among senior colleagues on the district's "operations side" as being both politically astute and professionally principled, and had established a

<sup>28</sup> Examples of local Chicago media coverage of the scandal and leadership transition: a) WBEZ:

<https://www.wbez.org/stories/cps-ceo-forrest-claypool-resigns-janice-jackson-taking-over/3c665968-79df-4a49-bcbb-0bf81f46fb15>. b) ABC-7: <https://abc7chicago.com/education/forrest-claypool-resigns-as-cps-ceo/2757751/>.

<sup>29</sup> The CPS "20-for-20 Campaign" was initiated by the district in winter 2016 to address a disparity in state funding for Chicago Public Schools. While CPS served 20% of state public school pupils, it received only 15% of state education allocations, despite Chicago's 20% contribution to state tax revenue. Every school in the district was mobilized in the effort. See: <https://www.smyser.org/ourpages/auto/2016/5/3/47806618/CPS%2020%20for%2020.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> For access to a set of informative articles on the passage of SB1 and its aftermath, from the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability, see: <https://www.ctbaonline.org/reports/fully-funding-evidence-based-formula-four-scenarios>.

<sup>31</sup> For access to the Reardon & Hinze-Pifer report, see: Reardon, S.F., & Hinze-Pifer, R. (2017). Test Score Growth Among Public School Students in Chicago, 2009-2014. Retrieved from Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis: <https://cepa.stanford.edu/content/test-score-growth-among-chicago-public-school-students-2009-2014>.

<sup>32</sup> Describing her learning process in the budget and finance arena, Dr. Jackson recalled: "So anyway, at the time I had [*names budget and finance staff*] ... when they would present things to me, they took a lot of extra care in like teaching me. And I as a leader allowed myself to be in that position and took that learner stance. And so even like sometimes in a meeting, depending on how many people were in there, if I didn't want to, you know, if I didn't really understand something I would ask afterwards."

reputation as a big picture thinker with a knack for seeing and framing patterns of dysfunction within complex systems. As Deputy Chief of Staff Eva Giglio noted, “She has the mindset that knows how a system breaks down and how you have to go in at different entry points to change that system. In a remarkable way she knows how to do that.”

Preparation and reputation notwithstanding, the move from CEEdO to CEO represented a daunting expansion of responsibility with relatively little warning, and new purview over a widened range of political and operational challenges. These emergent challenges in areas such as safety and security, transportation, human resources, law, and Board relations tended to keep operations departments in a reactive and “firefighting” mode, and easily consumed a CEO with daily crisis management and political damage control. If she was to achieve her aim of integrating the CPS “operations side” into a robust strategic and continuous improvement culture, she would also have to grapple with the challenge of balancing time for strategic and tactical activity – as she put it, “looking at my calendar and always making a commitment to stay focused on the strategic things that move the organization forward” - while getting ahead of as many incipient crises as possible. She and her new CEO team took several steps in the first six months of her tenure to elevate strategic inquiry and long-term planning as the new *modus operandi* for all central office chiefs and directors.

First, and consistent again with her training around leadership transitions, she organized her core staff around an entry planning and inquiry process to clarify the leadership terrain, take stock of available data on district status, and project a vision and timeframe for early goals and actions. Most of this core staff were seasoned members of her CEEdO team who had earned her trust and respect, and who understood her working style and strategic aspirations implicitly. The initial entry process, completed in January 2018, yielded a three-stage timeframe for the first year of the new CEO’s tenure – the first 90 days; the second 90 days; and the remainder of the year – with target priorities for each period (for partial/redacted plan, see [Exhibit 18](#)). By June 2018 this inquiry process yielded what Dr. Jackson called a “Big Hairy Audacious Goal” – to secure a high quality education for every student while grappling more effectively with issues of equity – along with four priority areas for strategic effort:

- to induct operations departments into the emerging practice culture of strategic continuous improvement (CI);
- to design more robust systems of talent recruitment, retention, and development at every system level;
- to codify and enact a value of “customer service” throughout the organization, through training and the design of protocols for interacting with parents, students, and school staff;
- to turn the corner on long-term fiscal stability, taking the system out of the red and into the black.

Second, the new CEO quickly established a weekly cadence of executive consultations designed to advance district planning and decision-making. She assembled an Executive Leadership Team (or ELT) from among central office executive officers and chiefs in functions most central to securing her strategic priorities. This began with the appointment of LaTanya McDade as the new CEEdO, and Arnie Rivera as the Chief Operating Officer. McDade had been Chief of Teaching and Learning under CEEdO Jackson, and was widely seen as Jackson’s peer in terms of strategic mindset, systems thinking, instructional sophistication, and leadership acumen. Rivera had served in senior staff positions in past CPS administrations as well as in City Hall, and was deeply apprised of the current political and fiscal contexts that the CEO would need to navigate. Other members would include the district’s General Council, and Chiefs of Talent, Communications, Governmental Policy, Finance, and Family and Community Engagement (FACE), among others, along with her Chief of Staff.

This group became the CEO’s primary advisory body, and was designed to function to distribute decision-making and sense-making capacity to a cadre of well-prepared leaders and thought partners. Available members of the ELT convened three times weekly. The first two convenings were brief touch

points (typically 8:00 AM on Tuesdays and Thursdays) to share information and keep the highest priority action items on track. The third meeting (usually on Fridays) used steadily evolving protocols and professional learning opportunities to build a collective strategic mindset, modes of strategic inquiry, and capacity for rapid loops of feedback and improvement. Dr. Jackson also challenged this group to understand their leadership charge beyond a narrow “hub and spokes” mindset, insisting instead that the committee members build habits and routines of networked communication that passed information quickly and reliably among committee members. This became anchored in a brief weekly conference call among ELT members that did not include the CEO. Over time ELT members were increasingly expected to engage the press and public confidently, communicate the district’s vision competently, and advocate the district’s positions persuasively in the CEO’s stead.

Third, one of the earliest and most pressing challenges the new CEO posed to the Executive Leadership Team was to embrace accountability for the full range of potential risks and liabilities threatening the progress of the district. This she framed as an opportunity– “by June 30<sup>th</sup>,” she told them, “Whatever happened before, we will not refer back to past administrations. We won’t say, Barbara did this, Forrest did that. We own everything. We are in charge. This is our organization. We are running things.” To do this she proposed a comprehensive “enterprise risk assessment” (or ERA), a department-level audit of “...everything that stinks in this place, everything we need to fix, every policy, practice, et cetera.” While such an assessment was not unprecedented, this look at district-wide risk would be unusually deep, comprehensive, and transparent to district stakeholders. The CEO staff devised an ERA scoring rubric to capture risk levels, and the 13 ELT members were charged with leading their subsidiary offices and departments in a frank and open analysis of imminent as well as potential threats to district coherence. The process eventually identified 77 discrete threats across the 13 audits of central office units, which were further categorized in a series of ELT Friday meetings in terms of risk severity as well as the area of district mission that was threatened (e.g. legal liability; public perception; financial exposure). A further series of ELT conversations then focused on proposals to mitigate the most serious and imminent risks, with each ELT member responsible for framing one risk concisely for group discussion and feedback. The process positioned the new CEO to engage the Chicago Board of Education around several imminent threats to system integrity in a way that projected both transparency and proactivity. As she put it:

*...My survival in this role is based on getting a handle on this stuff and addressing it. I know that I know how to do that, but I want to make sure I'm able to do that. Given the political climate and everything else, I need the runway to do it. So I am honest about how I'm going to operate, and honest and true to my leadership style - I don't have a problem being transparent. I don't have a problem saying that the baby is ugly. I don't have a problem because I'm not going to bring it up without the solution behind it.*

While this process achieved its stated ends, and put the new CEO in a strong position to control the narrative around several looming problems, it also was potently developmental for the ELT in several respects. It modelled and encoded core expectations regarding transparency and mutual accountability in her dealings with senior colleagues that for Dr. Jackson were normative but also pragmatic, since she viewed transparency as a strategic practice by which to gain public confidence in her capacity to mitigate rather than obscure serious problems. For her to practice *strategic transparency*, she needed timely, frank, and complete information from senior partners, and a willingness to face harsh realities and critical feedback, in ways that she herself modelled. Further, it admirably previewed the level of high stakes, data-driven inquiry and problem-solving that she intended to ask of her ELT colleagues routinely, and particularly in leading disciplined continuous improvement cycles in their own units. Her own consistency in modelling a learner’s stance and questioning her own assumptions was noted by her colleagues on the ELT. As Chief Information Officer Phillip DiBartolo observed: “She’s shown a willingness to learn...expressing a level of vulnerability...if you give her a piece of feedback, she’ll do something with it.” Chief of Safety and Security Jadine Chou similarly noted, “She’s always, ‘What am I missing? Is there anything else? She’ll look around the room and ask us, ‘Is there something that we’re

missing?’ And from that, I see that truly, it’s not just as a CEO managing us. It’s a CEO in partnership with us.”

***Establishing a Cadence of Leadership Development: Structures, Routines & Expert Help.*** Two other senior leadership convenings were designed and implemented over the first six months of CEO Jackson’s tenure, drawing upon some of the successful practices piloted in the CEEdO period. The first of these was the Executive Cabinet (EC) which also met weekly and included over 20 central office chiefs. Whereas the professional development implicated in the ELT meeting was decidedly job-embedded and urgently tactical<sup>33</sup>, Cabinet meetings provided an opportunity to build a broader professional learning community among Chief officers, and establish a common vocabulary for district development across the district’s academic and operational functions. Often the hour-long Cabinet meetings keyed on one Chief presenting their current work and sense-making around a highlighted problem of practice within their office, followed by questions and feedback from fellow Chiefs. This was complemented by sessions with external experts from academia or industry. As the Cabinet matured so did its centrality to the CEO’s policy making process. The group became a primary venue for stress-testing proposed tools and protocols, and gaining feedback around a range of central office policy issues.

The second leadership convening was the revival of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) meeting, occurring three or four times annually. This large meeting included all central office Chiefs, department directors, and program managers, along with selected program staff representing full department teams. Its purposes were several, including celebratory, informational, and to engage entire departmental leadership teams in professional learning activities that reinforced the CEO’s highest priority initiatives. These included the introduction of the customer service framework in December 2018, or the use of equity analysis tools in December 2019 to help teams identify gaps in their equity strategies. Of particular importance to Dr. Jackson was assuring that the language and concepts of the district’s core work were conveyed to the entire central office community with maximum consistency and fidelity to the district vision. [Exhibit 19](#) provides the PowerPoint presentation guiding the December 2018 SLT meeting, giving a sense of the range of issues and learning modes included in this full morning meeting.

Over a two-year period, the SLT meetings progressively incorporated more features of cutting-edge adult learning, including team-level break-out sessions to structure more discussion and collaboration across department boundaries. Techniques to consolidate learning at the end of meetings also evolved, using cell phones and real time survey and network analysis tools to poll the large gathering on prominent takeaways and implications for team-level work routines. And for the first time in December 2018, Network Chiefs and their deputies were included among the SLT participants, with a particular charge in breakout sessions to help central office staff hear and appreciate school-level perspectives on key policy matters more clearly. Timely follow-up communications from the CEO team then highlighted these takeaways, with an expectation that team leaders would explore and apply them with junior CPS staff. While these meetings were large, Chiefs and department leaders with whom we spoke generally affirmed their utility and appreciated the CEO team’s effort to make them informative. General Counsel Joseph Moriarty spoke for many when he remarked: “Those are actually effective meetings, where people at all levels of management are being called together. The information that’s shared is usually spot-on in terms of importance to that group.”

A pressing and abiding concern from 2018 forward involved how to “deepen the learning” among central office leaders both to better equip them to lead ambitious job-embedded learning within their own units, and to elevate their collective sense of accountability for maximizing impact from professional learning

<sup>33</sup> As Dr. Jackson described it, “This is an hour where we sit down and actually get work done with expertise in the same room. It’s been a nice kick in the butt for the team. Once everybody saw the totality of all the things that we need to clean up, they realized this isn’t typical work, this work is cabinet meeting work. This is the tactical, we got to clean the place up work. I think people recognize the enormity.”



experiences. For Dr. Jackson, this challenge was heightened by awareness that structured professional learning had been absent from the work lives of many central office senior administrators, especially in the district's operations departments. With this in mind, the new CEO persuaded a prominent Chicago funder to channel significant funding toward the development of her Executive Cabinet starting in autumn 2018.<sup>34</sup> The CEO team then engaged the Nonprofit Executive Education Program at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management to provide a year-long series of monthly PL sessions for the Cabinet.<sup>35</sup> The program, which utilizes star NWU management faculty, has an excellent reputation for using active adult learning strategies to drive highly engaging learning sessions. Topics covered by the Cabinet included crisis management, team-building, branding strategies, effective communication with data, productive conflict and providing developmental feedback to team members. In addition, a sub-set of key CEO staff and Executive Officers received one-to-one coaching sessions. For Dr. Jackson, the sessions concretely expressed her commitment to Chief development, while providing her with an opportunity to learn "shoulder-to-shoulder" with colleagues while observing them as learners. At the same time, aware of the potential inhibiting effect of her presence, she was careful to limit her input during the session presentations, reserving her comments to a few concluding observations around the relevance of session content to challenges facing the district and the Cabinet.

For many participants, the impacts of these sessions were eye-opening and even profound. From an adult learning perspective, the sessions provided Chiefs with input into the choice of topics for in-depth, access to well-designed tools and protocols, and opportunities to build the Cabinet as a team through well designed group breakout sessions. The sessions thus gained Chiefs' attention, produced "A-ha" moments, and rubbed up against long-standing CPS around leadership. As Chief of College and Career Readiness Michael Deuser framed it: "I think culture is still now as it has been. It's very, uh, execution oriented. That's sort of our leadership paradigm, executional accountability. And I think it's a CPS thing. I think it's kind of the Chicago thing, like, 'get it done'. And I think that this Northwestern program sort of opened up, for a lot of folks, new perspectives on what good leadership entails and what it means to do it. So I think that's been by far the best learning that we've got."

Further, for the CEO design team, collaboration with the Northwestern team on session planning advanced their own skills in terms of extending opportunities for reflection, pressing uncomfortable but essential questions, and challenging adult learners to confront their own "immunity to change."<sup>36</sup> Following the final Northwestern session in late 2019, for example, Deputy Chief of Staff Eva Giglio designed an exercise to press the question, "How do we make this learning really come alive?" Together with Dr. Jackson, and as the primary facilitator and designer of the PL agenda for central office leaders, she was not satisfied that a sufficient bridge had been built between the PL sessions and Chiefs' leadership activities. In an early 2020 Cabinet meeting she used poster board "walk-around" to list every NWU session topic, asking Chiefs to write down their biggest take-aways and comment on those listed by others. She then shifted the focus to ask a more penetrating set of questions, which revealed growth on the part of the Cabinet members to confront themselves as leaders. As she recounted the meeting:

*...you learned all this stuff in Northwestern. It's really powerful. Why aren't you implementing it? And most people are probably going to say, "time - I haven't built out the time for it." I'm too busy or whatever. And so instead we shifted the conversation into what are ineffective habits that*

<sup>34</sup> As Ms. Giglio recalled, "The executive cabinet team engages in...a program with Northwestern. Dr. Jackson had a funder who was interested in supporting her leadership. She said, how can I support you? And she said, you can support me best by supporting my team and I need my team to be built up really well to help carry on the work that I want to see happen."

<sup>35</sup> See: <https://www.kellogg.northwestern.edu/executive-education/take-action/contact-nonprofit.aspx>.

<sup>36</sup> The language employed in this reflective exercise drew upon the questions posed by Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey in their seminal work, *Immunity to Change* (2009), which was an influential text in Dr. Jackson's doctoral training program. See: Kegan, R. & Lahey, L. L. (2009). *Immunity to change: How to overcome it and unlock potential in yourself and your organization*. Harvard Business Press.

*you have that are preventing you from getting to where you want to go? What do you tell yourself that's helping you get away with that? What are you afraid to change... What happens if you don't make that change? That led to some very powerful conversations actually in the room. And it was eye opening to me. I could tell how much we've grown as a cabinet in the year. Those conversations would not have happened at that level.*

While a steady schedule of group PL experiences deepened shared understandings of the district's improvement agenda, a parallel cadence of individual meetings provided differentiated feedback to Chiefs and department directors. To anchor the provision of feedback and leadership growth, and to assure a flow of high quality information to top district leaders, the CEO team expanded the practice of bi-weekly reports from academic leaders to include the remaining operations officers, based on the same review process employed in the CEEdO period. As a matter of necessity given time demands, Dr. Jackson then engaged her senior staff as well as the CEEdO and Chief Operations Officer (COO) to read the bi-weekly reports from the Chiefs under their direct supervision, and arrange follow-up meetings with each Chief to monitor department progress. These meetings also became settings for job-embedded mentoring and feedback around problems of leadership practice, and allowed for frequent check-in conversations preceding annual RISE performance evaluation discussions.

Over time, the seriousness of these bi-weekly report meetings for Chiefs spurred the development of aligned bi-weekly reporting chains from the team and project level, then up to the department and Office level, and on to the senior executive team. Dr. Jackson maintained her practice of reading as many bi-weekly Chiefs' reports as possible. This practice then seeded her weekly update meetings with the CEEdO and COO, reduced unwanted surprises, and allowed her to engage Chiefs and department heads in a range of weekly settings in a well informed and appreciative manner. Many of the Chiefs we spoke with valued the bi-weekly reports and meetings as a developmental opportunity. As Chief of Diverse Learner Supports and Services Stephanie Jones reflected: "...we have touch points on a biweekly basis...with Chief McDade as well as an update for Chief Jackson...We have the autonomy to be very candid in all of our interactions...And when we're not being successful, are we flexible enough to come back and say: 'I need to make some changes, so I can get to the next place and being open for that process.' And I think that they create an environment that allows each one of us to be open and flexible for any changes." In a similar vein, Deputy Chief of Early Childhood Education Leslie Mckinily noted: "I think having those clear structures for one, there's conversations about moving work, but then there's conversations dedicated to developing me as a leader. And I like that piece."

As the major pillars of the District's program of transformation continued to mature, the web of professional learning and leadership development supports began to coalesce around longer arcs of focus and content. Late summer 2019, for example, marked the first time that the planning committee for the Senior Leadership Team professional learning felt confident to project a full year's scope and sequence for SLT meetings that would dovetail with the emerging agenda of the Executive Cabinet. As Director of School Quality Measurement and Research Jeff Broom, one of the planners, observed with satisfaction, "...the other thing that's really developmentally important is that the themes that...we're going to talk about in the senior leadership team meeting are the same...that we're talking week to week in cabinet and the academic chief meetings. So then it becomes an interesting conversation moving away from scope and sequence to more like a curriculum." In addition to greater coherence in the PL agenda, two other important impacts of the concerted effort to build PL and leadership development opportunities are evident.

First, and in combination with a number of strong hires at the district's senior level, the on-going investment in leadership affirmed a strong conviction among staff that district leadership at every level of the organization was exceptionally talented and on the rise. Mike Abello, former Chief of Early Childhood Education, asked to comment on the culture of continuous improvement he observed,

reflected, “I would say that it is a product of the leaders of each department. And to that extent, I think I had been truly blown away by the leadership at CPS.” And of her department colleagues, a mid-level analyst reflected, “I work with astoundingly smart people and fun people, and people who really care a lot about the work overall.” Second, the emphasis on support for leadership and competency development in formal and collaborative interactions seemed to promote greater collegiality in less formal, daily interactions, together with a spirit of accessibility and approachability that started with the CEO and her staff. Deputy Chief of Staff Eva Giglio, for example, noted the contrast between the wary and demoralized central office climate of 2015, and the collegial buzz of 2019. “When I come to work every day, I hear people talking and having academic and work-related discussions in the hallways, at desks, at cubicles, in offices... That didn't happen before. It was quiet. People did not talk to each other.” Peter Leonard, Director of Student Assessment, similarly appreciated “...the intentional attendance to culture, as the central office is a very collaborative space. My experience is that people do not tend to be territorial, but are interested in finding collective solutions to problems and where possible, collaborating on particular projects.” Maurice Swinney, the newly minted Chief of Equity, reflected on how such a climate and culture helps to advance shared thinking in areas of district innovation:

*I feel very free to go to another person's office and just talk through whatever needs talking through. That I think has also helped with people to understand how equity work is evolving. And it helps to inform my thinking about understanding how everyone else is working productively or not toward equity. So I don't have a history of knowing how siloed this place was, but I do hear enough anecdotes to know that it feels different once she became CEO.*

### **Advancing the District’s “North Stars”: Continuous Improvement, Customer Service, and Equity**

One of the strengths of Dr. Jackson’s leadership in the CEEdO period was in introducing and codifying guiding values and concepts in ways that could “flip the script” on traditional district power relations, and shift the academic side of the organization toward greater alignment with the improvement needs of schools. The infusion of the “Three Big Questions” into the structure and review of strategic plans and leaders’ bi-weekly reports, for example, encoded the expectation that leaders would root their planning in a theory of action around school service and impact. In the same way the ideal of “convergence” at the top of a “collaboration continuum” helped codify an expectation that leaders actively explore and enact strategies to challenge siloed functioning and thinking across unit boundaries, and facilitate accessibility of resources to schools.

In 2018, to grapple with the even more formidable challenge of integrating the district’s operations and academic functions around her coherence agenda, Dr. Jackson again focused on defining and codifying core values to guide the work of central office staff. Three values in particular matured from CEEdO origins to fuller expression in the CEO period: the practice of continuous improvement, an ethos of customer service, and a more systemic pursuit of equity. In each case, the CEO and her team committed time, treasure and talent to root these in the daily fabric of practice and awareness, becoming eventually in her words, “a way of being.” From a leadership perspective, the common strategy across these values would continue her practice of promulgating a succinct framework – as one director put it, “heuristics for guiding people’s work” – and consistently manifesting the framework through training, systems of daily practice, professional discourse, collective communication, and patterns of feedback and evaluation, both formal and informal.<sup>37</sup> Here we review in each case the outline of steps taken to root these values and associated structures and routines in the mindset and daily workstreams of the entire CPS central office.

<sup>37</sup> We remarked to Dr. Jackson in January 2020 that each of these values implied significant shifts in central office mindset and workflows. She responded: “Oh, they're huge. But one of the things that I've tried to do - I always try to put a framework around things. So we're not talking about equity without a framework. We're not talking about customer service without a framework. We're not talking about continuous improvement without a framework. I don't know if that's right or wrong, that's just how I lead.

**Continuous Improvement (CI).** We begin with CI, in part because CI structures and routines would become integral to engaging central office leaders and staff in translating aspirations to equity and customer service into concrete goals and strategies across academic and operational functions. As Dr. Jackson and her staff took on district leadership, they had already spent over two years designing and enculturating an approach to continuous improvement that departed conspicuously from the familiar performance management paradigm. To be sure, the CI approach continued to emphasize traditional PM activities such as metric-based goal setting, a cadence of progress monitoring meetings, and leader accountability for meeting progress projections. Increasingly, though, the aspiration to re-shape PM to better equip departments to investigate and understand both the why and the how of their professional practice began to predominate. This new approach underscored the importance of asking and re-asking fundamental questions about practice and purposes in tandem with goal setting and tactical implementation, in order to assure that a department was both developing powerful work and anticipating potential obstacles. And it emphasized the reciprocal responsibility of senior leaders and staff to improve the CI process itself so as to inspire staff to push on the boundaries of their thinking and sharpen the collective expertise of central office teams.<sup>38</sup> As one 2018 CI document stated it: “The Continuous Improvement process relies for its effectiveness on participants’ enthusiastic engagement with the framework as a way to make the work of the district as predictable, efficient, and effective as possible. Engaging in Continuous Improvement is not additional work – it is the work.”<sup>39</sup> (See [Exhibit 20](#).)

While the language and practices of CI were still new to academic department staff, there were signs that collective planning discussions were becoming more strategic and thoughtful in ways better aligned to similar planning processes at the school level. A three-fold challenge arose, then, with the transition from CEEdO to CEO: first, to clarify the new CI approach in ways that would deepen staff understanding and engagement; second, to quickly integrate and induct the operations departments into CI routines and practices; and third, to build human and technical capacity to sustain CI advancement in central office while coordinating the strategic cycles of schools, networks, and central office departments more powerfully.

As previously noted, an important decision of the CEEdO period was to monitor the quality of performance management practices on a regular basis. In his role as primary PM evaluator, one of Jacare Thomas’ early recommendations was to drop the term “performance management” in favor of “continuous improvement,” both to deflate old anxieties associated with PM, and highlight the new system’s learning and practice orientation.<sup>40</sup> It was not until winter 2018, however, with the new challenge of integrating all central office departments around a common annual inquiry method, that the shift to a CI focus was officially codified in a policy document. While brief at 4 pages, the framework announced a “rebranding” of PM as CI with the expressed purpose of linking the improvement of every department with the

But I feel like sometimes when you don't give people clarity from a rubric or something, what are the expectations? I like rubrics, I like to know how do I get an "A", what are the expectations? I think that's good for everyone to know.”

<sup>38</sup> This element of inspiration from top leadership was cited by several central office staff members as a factor contributing to their willingness to stretch themselves and their learning to advance the organization. Comparing Dr. Jackson’s leadership to an earlier CEO, one central office Chief observed: “...you didn't want to make him mad. Dr. Jackson, you don't want to disappoint. There's a big difference...Because people you don't want to disappoint, inspire. People who you're scared to make angry, at some point you will stop running through brick walls for those people.”

<sup>39</sup> In “Continuous Improvement Optimization for CPS, July 2018,” p. 11.

<sup>40</sup> As Mr. Thomas described it: “I started off with just kind of doing the research [*in Spring 2017*], per the request of Dr. Jackson to report on what performance management looked like. One of my initial recommendations is that we need to stop calling it performance management because it had a stigma attached to it. So buy-in was kind of low and had a history here...People were really kind of fearful of it. They did not see it as, you know, an opportunity for convergence across the district...The initial thing is the request to change the systems to continuous improvement. Request to align all the continuous improvement efforts in the district and to create a coherent system of continuous improvement, which Dr. Jackson was very clear on in an email to me when we saw that the network strategic plans...were really kind of doing their own thing...without any training on continuous improvement work. Um, and Dr. Jackson says she expected coherence. And so that was the beginning of the scope expansion.”

overcoming of siloed practice – through the practice of convergence - all in service to schools (see [Exhibit 21](#)). The document then clarified several dimensions of the rebranded process, including the broad rationale for the process, and in particular, its intention to focus and streamline department work around clear priorities, free of “got you” dynamics, with reliance instead on growing leadership and advancing interdependence among offices. Also included was a schematic diagram (p. 2) of an aligned model and cycle of CI across central office, network offices, and schools, along with a graphic depiction of a four-phase CI inquiry cycle, broadly modeled on the Deming Plan-Do-Study-Act sequence.

The circulation of the initial CI brief in April 2018 served to alert all Chiefs and department directors to the intended shifts in emphasis and ambition around continuous improvement for the approaching SY 2019 school year. And it anchored an intensive flurry of design activity in spring and early summer 2018 to adapt old protocols and field-test new tools to regulate CI across the entire central office. This work was undertaken collaboratively by the small CI team within the School Quality Measurement and Research (SQRM) department, led by Mr. Thomas, and Eva Giglio, Deputy Chief of Staff in the CEO Office, and included among its products:

- An expanded, 16-page elaboration of the CI framework (July 2018) (Titled “Continuous Improvement Optimization for CPS”) which included a full glossary of CI terminology (and comparison and bridging to analogous PM terms) (see [Exhibit 20](#));
- A redesigned CI strategic planning template that integrated all planning steps for each strategic priority onto one dedicated sheet (with sheets for up to four strategic priorities), as well as progress monitoring tools included in separate tabs. (see [Exhibit 22](#));
- A new tool added to the strategic planning workbook, called “Stop-Start-Improve,” designed to help teams better categorize the progress of strategic elements, terminate them if necessary, or alternately adjust and improve them (see [Exhibit 23](#));
- An updated suite of scheduling and assessment protocols designed to track and assess the quality of strategic plans, project monitoring meetings, and department engagement across the CI annual sequence (CI Sequence Tracking, see [Exhibit 24](#));
- A foundational series of training modules (basic and refresher) to facilitate on-boarding of new staff and leaders, and assure consistency in understandings of CI across operations and academic departments (see [Exhibit 25](#)).

As plans proceeded to orient all central office departments to the “new” CI process, particular and quite deliberate attention was devoted to orienting and on-boarding 20 departments on the operations side. The intentionality of the effort reflected two years of experience with the challenges of socializing new audiences to CI – involving organizational, technical, and psychological shifts. Given tight time constraints and chronic competing commitments, The SQMR/CEO design team moved to script the operations CI transition fairly tightly. They first developed an “Operations CI Development Plan” in late spring 2018 (see [Exhibit 26](#)), with an accompanying, ambitious training schedule to support the development of working strategic plans by early autumn 2018. The plan itself incorporated several features of strategic thinking, including a theory of action and methods for monitoring progress.

Senior Leadership Team (SLT) meetings as well as dedicated professional learning sessions were utilized to deliver a total of five training events (general introduction plus 4 specialized modules) between summer and December 2018. Fishbowl exercises and other adult learning experiences were utilized as well to simulate the intended CI inquiry processes using accomplished practitioners from the academic departments (see [Exhibit 27](#)). Executive Cabinet meetings were used to “manage up” around the attention of Chiefs to CI quality, and every strategic plan was reviewed for quality using the quality rubric from the CEoO period, with feedback delivered to Chiefs and department directors (see [Exhibit 28](#)). From there the design team committed to enhanced monitoring and consultation activities to assure that all Operations Departments would enact the full CI sequence (particularly Beginning, Middle, and End of Year

monitoring meetings). The plan's ambitious goal was to "create a coherent system of Continuous Improvement across Chicago Public Schools" by June 2019, with operations departments functioning comparably to the best academic departments in enacting the full CI arc by December 2018, albeit with supplemental CI team facilitation (see [Exhibit 29](#)).

While compliance with the broad structure and cadence of the CI roll-out among operations departments was generally high, available data reveals considerable variation across departments in the quality of uptake in specific areas. Quality scores for strategic plan drafts in late summer, for example, show variation both within and across department plans, requiring re-writes in two cases, and one case of failure to produce a plan at all. The first year of CI implementation also revealed differences in mindsets and strategic dispositions between the operations and academic departments as they engaged the common process. For many academic departments, the primary struggle of performance management had involved finding reliable measures and metrics linked to instructional or curricular improvements that could be tracked on an iterative basis. In contrast, many operations departments gravitated easily to the quantification of their major goals in terms of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), given the "countable" nature of the work they performed and the services they rendered. They responded positively to the tracking of iterative performance benchmarks. Some operations departments instead struggled more to think through the sequence of contingencies between their work and student outcomes, and thus found the strategic plan's theory of action requirement more remote to conceptualize. As Dr. Jackson characterized it: "...it wasn't hard to get them to think in outcomes, you know, outcomes as the focus. That's the advantage I think on the operations part. But getting them to slow down and make a plan and be intentional was different. They just weren't accustomed to working like that. It's just like get the work done, get the contract done." On the other hand, the district's emerging emphasis on customer service provided an attractive anchor for thinking about continuous improvement for several operations directors we interviewed (see next section).

Breaking down traditional work silos and pushing toward convergence by operationalizing CI across all central office departments was an important goal for the CEO team through 2019. Our interviews revealed a broad consensus among operations and academic leaders that the multi-pronged strategy to integrate central office around one CI cadence and model was yielding more inter-department conversation and reducing the tendency of departments to "go it alone." In this regard it was critical that the strategic planning tool explicitly directed teams to surface the likely "inter-dependencies" between their goals and resources and those of other departments, and to explicitly articulate coordination strategies. While realized convergence was still an "ideal state," as one department leader put it, he did see signs of greater openness and interest in "...the shared vision that is starting to coalesce. I hear now more people talking about that." For a few Chiefs, the urgency to challenge siloed thinking was rising. As Chief of ONS Bogdana Chkoumbova observed: "The silos existing, you know, within offices here in central office - it is a very critical mission for us because we are not a content specialist office...So we need to make sure that we have access [*to other offices*]. Not only access, but we have a very mutual investment in developing certain areas in the organization that in return, can really have a positive impact on schools." In this regard, a helpful practice involved the attendance of CEO staff and internal district partners at department mid-year and end-of-year strategic reviews. This encouraged deeper conversations among partners around CI problems of practice as well as the diffusion of CI best practices across diverse departments.

It was also helpful to require consultations with the budget department as part of the strategic planning process, and to collaborate with the budget department to conduct those conversations in terms of the substance and accomplishment of the strategic work. In this regard Heather Wendell, the new Budget Chief, who was coming into her position parallel to Dr. Jackson and her team, drew on her background in large-scale grants management to frame budget development for department directors as a strategic investment in securing priority goals. "You have to monitor your outcomes, monitor your spend, you

know, and do a heightened level of reporting. And I think taking that same sort of philosophy into the budget office really meshed nicely with the notion of strategic planning and continuous improvement, that we were focusing on for the schools and for the central office. Getting everybody to think deeply regardless of where the dollar comes from, we want to take that same level of due diligence and, you know, make sure that we're spending every dollar wisely.”

In turn, strategic plans became a vital resource for building the capacity of budget analysts to facilitate deeper thinking around “their budget footprint,” and the idea of “your budget as value statement.” As the Budget Chief described her staff development, “...my goal is for my team to earn their seat at the table in all of the programmatic and strategic discussions they're having with their departments. They have to bring enough value and show enough knowledge and not necessarily be - I don't need you to be a social worker - but you need to know enough about what the goals are of that work to be able to have a thoughtful conversation where I want the departments to say like, Oh, we're having a strategy discussion. We can't really do this without our budget analyst or a budget manager to continuously make that connection back.” In the case of operations departments, this approach to budget development actually proved to be an effective entry point for honing strategic priorities in their inaugural CI plans.

Following the central office expansion of CI, the critical frontier for CI development involved strengthening the strategic planning work at all three of the system's levels, while tethering the three levels in a robust, focused flow of relevant information keyed to school improvement. Several steps were taken to advance this aim at the central office level, including:

- *Senior hires with attention to CI.* Over two years the CEO continued to screen senior hires for their familiarity and receptivity to the district's CI culture. By late 2019, new senior hires in areas like Portfolio Management, College and Career Success, and Teaching and Learning brought strong skill sets and mindsets around CI into Executive Cabinet discussions and other policy exchanges bearing on CI advancement;
- *Building coherent staff capacity.* It had long been acknowledged that lean staffing in CI support functions posed a stiff constraint on the pace of CI process improvement. Through 2019 and early 2020 hiring began in both the CEO office and the Office of Network Supports (more below) to increase expert support for central office and network office strategic plans respectively, and to begin designing coherent information flows between the central and network planning levels, as well as other cross-level collaborative structures. This culminated in the hiring of a Director of Strategic Planning located within the CEO Office in spring 2020, further signaling the determination of the CEO to prevent CI from devolving to a siloed function of any one central office department.
- *Planning for a Unified CI Platform.* Also acknowledged from the late CEEdO period forward was the need for a more facile suite of tools and linking technologies than those afforded by Google Tools, if alignment between the three levels was to become reality. The technical limitations of the current tools, both technically and in terms of connectivity, were a recurring source of friction between the CEO staff and many department directors, and frustrated Dr. Jackson as well. [Exhibit 30](#) reflects an effort within SQMR to conceptualize a “One Stop Shop” for all things CI at all levels, one that would provide senior leadership with summary dashboards by Office, department, and Network office.

**At the network office level,** efforts to advance CI were nested within several other structural initiatives designed to aid Network Chiefs and staffs in accessing central office resources and expertise for their schools. Following the intensive work with high schools in the CEEdO period, it was decided to devote four networks exclusively to high schools in an effort to intensify attention to social supports and instructional improvement, with Chiefs selected for their demonstrated expertise in high school improvement. Consistent with the district's emphasis on convergence in furtherance of differentiating supports for schools, the district then drew together staff from the Offices of Network Supports (ONS) and Teaching and Learning (T&L) to form a “High School Resource Hub Collaborative.” The aim, as one

T&L department director described it, was to shift “...from a network based instructional support model to a content specialist Teaching & Learning model,” entailing the creation of new content specialist roles and considerable cross-unit design coordination. The strategy was to work first at the scale of the district’s roughly 120 high schools, and learn enough to expand the same model to elementary schools within two years. These innovations raised the stakes for improving articulation between each school’s “Continuous Improvement Work Plan” (or CIWP), and Network and Central Office strategic plans. Other key areas of T&L/ONS coordination included updating the CIWP platform to reflect enhancements to the School Excellence Framework<sup>41</sup> and Multi-Tiered System of Supports<sup>42</sup>. Steps to advance alignment and communication across those plans included:

- *Developing CI support staff positions within ONS.* With a change in leadership at ONS in spring 2019, along with a rising urgency to improve the capacity of Network offices to differentiate supports for higher needs schools, the advantages of staffing positions devoted to increasing continuous improvement capacity became evident. An Executive Director for Continuous Improvement was hired with significant experience in both corporate and non-profit performance management. She supervised a Senior Manager for CI focused on facilitating over 600 school-level strategic CIWP plans on a dedicated platform, and a Data Manager overseeing the work of 10 Data Strategists servicing the 17 Network Offices. The new ONS CI-focused staff was now positioned to collaborate with the central office CI staff now consolidated in the CEO Office, as well as with the Office of Teaching and Learning to re-design the interface of central office and network offices for more agile responsiveness to school needs.
- *Moving CIWP design and oversight to ONS.* In the early phases of restructuring performance management as continuous improvement, locating design and development responsibility in one central office department – SQMR – seemed the optimal strategy for driving planning alignment across the district’s three levels. With the arrival of new ONS CI support roles, though, the advantages of moving CIWP development closer to the point of school supervision and support became clearer. With a small but capable staff now focused on articulating the network and school planning processes, more attention could be devoted to pressure testing different ways in which Network office plans could function as an efficient conductor of school resource needs through to central office departments.
- *Piloting a “tagging” system for central office services within CIWPs.* An important advance in linking CIWPs to central office resources involved the creation of a pull-down “tagging” system on the CIWP platform to allow schools to identify and signal central office departments and resources implicated in their priority goals. In 2019 the mechanism to signal central office departments of the nature and number of their school tags remained manual, falling to the CI staff to download, sort, and transmit the tags to those offices in time to be integrated into department strategic planning discussions. The aspiration for the 2021 CIWP cycle was to fully automate that transmission process.
- *Continuing the development of Network-level strategic planning processes.* During the CEO period, efforts to improve the strategic planning of Network Offices closely paralleled the same work with central office offices and departments. Through similar training in processes like problem identification and root cause analysis, ONS leaders emphasized aligning the strategic planning frameworks between central office and network office versions of the protocol. [Exhibit 31](#) displays the strategic planning protocol for the four high school networks for SY 2020. What is evident in the high school collaborative version, in addition, is an effort to align the four high school networks around common implementation goals and metrics. The aim was to make the four strategic plans

<sup>41</sup> See: [https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1xZu7lN0ei0BHeIKmgAd-Mcx\\_GZOwd49yJh8HZusPChA/present?ueb=true#slide=id.p3](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1xZu7lN0ei0BHeIKmgAd-Mcx_GZOwd49yJh8HZusPChA/present?ueb=true#slide=id.p3).

<sup>42</sup> For overview of MTSS Framework, see: <https://www.cps.edu/services-and-supports/special-education/understanding-special-education/multi-tiered-system-of-supports/>.



more comparable, allowing more productive conversations among high school network chiefs regarding the relative success of various strategies to improve their assigned high schools.

- *Continuing the involvement of network office chiefs and deputies in central office professional learning activities.* The practice of including NCs in PL activities at the cross-district Senior Leadership level continued in the CEO period, with NCs continuing to take consultative roles as experts in school perspectives on service delivery in smaller breakout sessions. This continued to be seen as a valuable way to draw school and network perspectives into central office collective learning, as well as enacting parity between central office and network leadership as partners in differentiating services to schools.

One of the impacts of investing in dedicated CI positions within ONS was to advance and deepen understandings of what strategic alignment across central office, network, and school levels should look like, and to what ends. As Dr. Jackson's tenure progressed, it became increasingly clear that the challenges facing strategic planning at the Network level were twofold: first, to develop a format for strategic plans that linked each network's agenda around a coherent set of common aims, while allowing plans to differentiate effectively between the resource needs of distinct categories of schools; and second, to abet a flow of relevant information between the three levels throughout the year in ways that helped schools to adapt and improve. Clearly the answer involved much more than could be delivered simply by duplicating sections and formats across the three strategic planning protocols. For ONS Chief Bogdana Chkoumbova, the question came down to: "...how is this continuous improvement process actually connecting us and getting us towards that convergence piece versus serving as another structure that siloes us." At the time of this writing, much of the conversation between the CEO staff, the Office of Teaching and Learning (T&L), and ONS-based continuous improvement staff involved improving the abilities of network office staffs to integrate information from schools' CIWPs and central office departments into network strategic plans, in part by improving consultation channels between network offices and central office departments. One off-shoot of this line of discussion involved delivery of joint professional learning for Instructional Support Leaders (ISLs) by the Office of T&L and ONS, rather than by ONS alone, so as to elevate the ISLs' role as brokers of information and supports flowing to teachers, and increase their capacity to advance curricular initiatives such as the Curriculum Equity Initiative (CEI; see page 58) overseen by the Office of T&L.

**Customer Service.** One of the new CEO's earliest initiatives in winter 2018 was the announcement of a campaign to improve the quality of engagement with the district's "customers," and particularly with school staff and parents. In many respects the customer service campaign was a logical extension of the foundational messaging to academic departments during the CEdO period, to revitalize a general ethos of service, and to challenge mindsets and practices that frustrate rather than meet the needs of schools and families. This view had gained broad currency in central office by 2018, as reflected in the view of CEdO LaTanya McDade: "Some of the challenges were in getting people to understand that you have to make shifts at this level - that we work for schools and schools don't work for us. When I was a principal I felt like we worked for the district and we were responsive to the district. And in this administration, with Dr. Jackson, it's the other way around. For continuous improvement to work, for school improvement to happen, we have to live in a space of service. And the work that we're doing should be in service to the efforts that are happening in the field, in schools, in order for school improvement to take place. It is a refreshing concept for me coming into this domain."

By invoking "customer service," the new CEO was also intentionally appropriating standard corporate terminology to broadcast a new commitment to shifting CPS culture to a more rigorous and *measurable* standard of service delivery. As Dr. Jackson framed it, "We want you to see the people that we serve as our consumers and people...who we want to satisfy." The messaging was as much internal as external, since many of the district departments that regularly engage with the public – from Enrollment Services and Safety and Security, to Transportation and Technology – performed the district's essential non-

instructional functions. What was lacking was a more systematic approach to engagement that would clarify customer service as a practice, and provide levers of accountability amenable to continuous improvement. In response the CEO team developed a diversified strategy for advancing an agenda for customer service practices across central office departments. The elements included:

- Assigning a human resources professional working in the Office of Talent to oversee the development of the general strategy and roll it out to departments on an expedited schedule;
- Following an inquiry period focused on models in education and in other industries, developing a facile customer service framework that could be communicated easily and translated into training and professional learning materials (see [Exhibit 32](#));
- Developing and improving a set of training modules to conduct with staff in departments with particularly high levels of interaction with school staff and parents, and then eventually with staff across all departments and units (see [Exhibit 33](#));
- Conducting surveys and other investigations of the status of customer service practices across departments, and working with departments to develop metrics and instruments to monitor CS levels as part of continuous improvement efforts
- Developing a clearer focus on customer service within the existing School Support Center, defined as “a single, cross-functional resource for schools requiring expert assistance or advocacy on CPS policies and procedures.”<sup>43</sup> Under Dr. Jackson the SSC further defined itself as an intermediary agent whose clients included both schools (especially principals and school clerks) and other central office departments.

As Dr. Jackson acknowledged, elevating the language of customer service as a central office management principle was not without controversy, and engendered some resistance. “Some people felt like it was too much of a business frame,” she recalled, “and had no place in a school system setting.” Such skepticism is not surprising, given deep and widespread concerns among educators over the marketization of public education and the dangers of reducing schooling to the status of a consumer good.<sup>44</sup> In general, however, our interviews suggest a positive response to customer service principles and practices on the part of most central office and department leaders. The framework itself, organized around the acronym CART (Courteous, Accurate, Respectful & Timely), was clear, compelling, accessible to staff, and easily elaborated in training modules, which were generally viewed as well used time.<sup>45</sup> More broadly, Chiefs and directors evidenced a strong embrace of the CART framework as a reference point for their own leadership. As Deputy Chief of Early Childhood Education Leslie McKinily expressed it:

*I think it's more so about how you continue to reference that and your leadership and in your interactions. And so I think at every point, whether we're building a building, whether we're hiring talent, whether we're talking about curriculum trainings and supports, we always want to*

<sup>43</sup> See: <https://www.cps.edu/about/departments/school-support-center/>.

<sup>44</sup> For a cogent review of these concerns, see: Blakely, J. (April 1, 2017). How school choice turns education into a commodity. *The Atlantic*, 17. (<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/04/is-school-choice-really-a-form-of-freedom/523089/>.) Assessments of the appropriateness and efficacy of “customer service” as a construct of educational administration range from the celebratory (e.g., <https://www.idra.org/resource-center/customer-service-for-school-improvement/>) to the apologetic (e.g. <https://www.k12insight.com/trusted/dawkins-one-simple-formula-school-customer-service/>) to pointed critiques of “customer service” as a neoliberal, problematic, and anti-democratic construct (e.g. <https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/12/25/the-language-of-neoliberal-education/>) (also Anderson & Cohen, 2019; Lapuente & Van de Walle, 2020). Advocates for applying customer service principles in educational settings broadly agree that education as a social function resists narrow reduction to a consumer good, and that viewing internal and external system stakeholders as “customers” should not preclude the equal application of other constructs, including those of partner, collaborator, and co-creator (Bressers & Edelenbos, 2014; Askeland, 2020)

<sup>45</sup> One department director noted of the training program: “...the training from talent around customer service was great. And all of our managers and network staff participated and had, you know, very good comments to say.”

*remember, and it's always stressed to our team, the school is our customer. That's who we serve, the family, the children of Chicago, those are our customers.*

Interestingly, the adoption of the language of customer service and its codification as a framework was particularly welcomed by operations leaders, many of whom came to CPS with prior corporate backgrounds, and were seeking alignment to the priorities of the new CEO. In the context of making sense of the CEO's approach to continuous improvement, the new customer service framework provided both a set of principles relevant to their core functions and practices, and a source of measurable KPI's (or Key Performance Indicators) directly applicable to their strategic planning. This in turn seemed to reinforce the identification of operations Chiefs and directors with their new CEO and her coherence agenda. Chief of Procurement Jonathan Maples, for example, brought long private sector experience in both continuous improvement and customer support to his new role. He saw more parallels than differences around CS in public sector work: "...the principles are the same in terms of how you work with people...again, it gets back to simple continuous improvement, focus on the customer, eliminate waste, value analysis, value engineering, you know, really look at how do you deliver value and...what's your mechanism to deliver value?" One mechanism in his unit was to hire a former CPS school clerk as an ombudsman for school-level procurement issues: "...it's not someone who never worked in a school trying to make that assessment...It was a person to try to hear the voice of the customer better and figure out how we address those on a timely basis."

***Bringing Equity to the Forefront of District Vision.*** As we have seen, awareness of equity and pervasive disparity were critical to Dr. Jackson's thinking and leadership from her first day as CEEdO, and were prominent in the three-year vision advanced through her initiative in spring 2017. The three-year vision repeatedly emphasized the district's obligation to provide an equitable education to every student, and to overcome historically persistent achievement gaps linked to race, ethnicity, and disability. Highlighting equity as a "moral imperative" and core belief, the three-year vision text committed to deepening professional commitment and capacity to use data and policy analysis to surface patterns of bias impacting student success, and actively train staff to recognize such patterns in their practice. Delivery of rigorous instruction was characterized as a "matter of equity," while the new High School Strategy was organized around "equity of access, excellence, and advocacy." Systemic circumstances such as variable teacher attrition rates and access to quality community partnerships were also earmarked for attention, and the state's persistence in "maintaining two separate and unequal systems for funding public education in Illinois." By most measures, then, equity as a guiding principle was a central pillar of the CPS vision during the CEEdO period, with evidence of strong collective consideration of how the principle would be enacted (and measured) in district goals and practices.

As Dr. Jackson took on the CEO's responsibilities, however, several factors converged to raise the urgency of equity as a district commitment, many of which we noted in our earlier review of contextual factors. Without doubt the national context of rancor and consternation around persistent patterns of racial injustice and disparities, elevated further by the polarizing language and policies of the Trump administration in denying or even embracing those disparities, made the urgency of addressing these issues in public institutions more pressing. At the same time in Chicago, battle lines in general and educational politics increasingly were being drawn around competing narratives of racial and social justice, with advocates for school choice, accountability and competition clashing with champions of neighborhood school investment and enhanced social supports for the political high ground.<sup>46</sup> At the neighborhood level, the implications of neighborhood disinvestment were increasingly existential for CPS, as Black residents left the city, school enrollments dwindled on the South and West sides, and

<sup>46</sup> Organizations such as the Chicago Teachers Union, The Chicago Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights, the Lori Lightfoot Mayoral Campaign, and the Chicago Public Education Fund all staked out equity-based advocacy positions implicating CPS district leadership in the period 2015 – 2020 in ways that contextualized CPS policies.

pervasive distrust of long-standing regional disparities – the Northside vs Southside gap – undercut public confidence in civic institutions.<sup>47</sup> Equally frustrating for Dr. Jackson, though, was persistent evidence of severe differences in access to quality instruction and curriculum across city schools, and particularly in high school classrooms. This evidence arose in the series of high school instructional walk sessions that helped launch the High School Strategy, and was borne out in chronically flat student growth rates on measures like the SAT and PSAT.

Several closely integrated strategies were pursued beginning in spring 2018 to further sharpen a coherent agenda for equity within CPS. First, and following the explicit recommendation of the CPS Race and Equity Working Group in 2018 (see [Exhibit 34](#)), the CEO commissioned the creation of an Equity Office and Chief Equity Officer position, beginning in February 2018. Here we note that the recent literature on equity-focused institutional strategies is clear that merely setting up a dedicated central office unit will not assure its potency in shifting mindsets, policies, and practices (Irby, Meyers & Salisbury, 2019; Starr, 2020). Instead several institutional conditions need to be addressed, starting with situating and empowering the office high in the district’s leadership and policy hierarchy, and seeing that the office roots its work in the broader agenda to align coherently to the improvement needs of schools (Samuels, 2019). To move in these directions, the CEO appointed Dr. Maurice Swinney as Chief Equity Officer in September 2018, reporting directly to the CEO Office. Dr. Swinney’s prior position was as principal in a “turnaround” CPS high school on the city’s south side, with doctoral background in equity studies and prior experiences as a literacy teacher and coach in New Orleans. His appointment was consistent with Dr. Jackson’s emphasis on foregrounding the perspectives of principals in shifting central office mindsets and practices. In turn, his status as an Office Chief assured that he would participate in Cabinet-level deliberations, and thereby engage and influence every other office and department in the organization.

A second imperative for successful Equity Offices is to ground their work in clear, communicable, and compelling ideas and explanations of what equity is and why it is vital to students and the district (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). Consistent with Dr. Jackson’s high regard for “leadership by framework,” Dr. Swinney was tasked with leading a research and consultation process that would yield a district Equity Framework within a year, and build his own profile as a public advocate for the district’s emerging agenda. In ways that drew upon the CEO’s experiences with vision development, Dr. Swinney drafted a skeletal conceptual frame, and trial-ballooned its elements on a listening tour covering all major groups of district stakeholders across a range of settings. At the same time the new Equity team was examining the available literature for current definitional frameworks, consulting potential external partners<sup>48</sup>, soliciting advice from comparable school districts, engaging Chiefs and department heads about their internal equity initiatives, and developing a district data profile of measures most salient for policy making. As this work was proceeding, Dr. Swinney was previewing key graphics and conceptual frames in convenings with senior leaders, network chiefs, and principals. An advanced draft of the framework was released and shared internally in November 2019, with an updated version released in August 2020 (see [Exhibit 35](#)). Some consequential features of this framework in terms of district policy and practice include:

- Advancing a definition of equity that distinguishes the term from “equality,” foregrounds the importance of disrupting racial inequity as the most deeply systemic issue facing CPS, and melding that with language emphasizing the success of every child in the system;

<sup>47</sup> These issues were made starkly clear in a Westat evaluation report commissioned by CPS that examined the set of controversies surrounding CPS proposals to re-purpose the National Teachers Academy as a high school serving the Near South Loop in 2018. See: <https://schoolinfo.cps.edu/SchoolActions/Download.aspx?fid=6458>.

<sup>48</sup> Consultations with the **Building Equitable Learning Environments (BELE) Network** were particularly consequential for this stage of framework development, given its focus on supporting whole district change processes around equity. See: <https://belenetwork.org/>.

- Introducing a set of inquiry norms or dispositions – the Equity CURVE (for curiosity, urgency, resiliency, vulnerability & empathy) that can help regulate collaborative participation in equity spaces;
- Elaborating the intellectual and practice framework of “Targeted Universalism”<sup>49</sup> as a data-friendly approach to identifying and mitigating systemic and structural sources of inequity, in which one-size-fits-all is replaced by inquiry into how to address common patterns of disparity for particular populations and settings;
- Positioning racial equity as a **process** involving the adoption and use of shared conceptual **lens** to identify and disrupt biased policies, and take up and institutionalize anti-racist practices;
- Positioning racial equity as an outcome that can be measured and continuously improved;
- Specifying each of the 4 dimensions of the equity lens in detail and in action – Liberty Thinking; Inclusive Partnerships; Resource Equity; and Fair Policies and Systems – to illustrate how - when deployed in an equity space - they comprise a theory of action of how to identify systemic root causes, propose solutions, and empower those closest to the opportunity gap to shape those solutions;
- Organizing the framework document itself pedagogically, so that it functions as an entry training framework around which more detailed and specified tools can be deployed in a range of training settings and circumstances.

Third, the literature around effective Equity Offices also stresses the importance of situating and infusing equity analysis and advocacy within the daily structures and work routines that *actually* govern how policies become translated into practices linking central office to schools (Irby, Meyers & Salisbury, 2019). In this regard the CPS Equity Framework intentionally articulated to the structures and routines of continuous improvement in three consequential ways. To begin, both the Targeted Universalism paradigm and the definition of racial equity offered early in the Framework made explicit the importance of building data and gathering evidence around equity goals for the purposes of disciplined inquiry. This was linked in turn to building the efficacy of district stakeholders in the proposition that equity problems were subject to disruption, displacement, and substantive improvement.

Further, the Framework’s “Action Roadmap” clearly lays out a continuous improvement cycle that utilizes features like the Equity CURVE norms and the dimensions of the Equity Lens in ways comparable to root cause and gap analyses. Closely parallel to the district’s CI framework, the Roadmap evokes the familiar Plan-Design-Study-Act cycle, but in ways more broadly accessible and adaptable to a range of stakeholder settings (e.g. a partnership between a school and a community group). Finally, the Framework’s speedy adaptation to an Equity Toolkit<sup>50</sup> made several tools and protocols based on CURVE and the Equity Lens dimensions quickly available for central office and network strategic planning in summer 2019. Equity Office staff facilitated strategic planning sessions devoted to applying these tools in tandem with integrating the CEO’s new five-year vision goals visibly in every plan. In a similar way Equity Office staff proved effective in facilitating several equity reflection sessions using these tools during the December 2019 Senior Leadership Team meeting. Thus the CI annual sequence plus the regular arc of leadership convenings provided a matrix of robust structures and routines through which to infuse the Equity Lens into central office CI deliberations.

While establishing an Equity Office provided a promising lever for introducing an actionable equity framework within the organization, the CEO looked to the district’s vision framework to situate and amplify equity as a supra-ordinate guiding principle and an anchor of the district’s public identity. In this regard it was fortunate timing that a revision of the first three-year vision statement<sup>51</sup> was well underway

<sup>49</sup> For a useful overview of Targeted Universalism in education and social services, see: <https://www.fsg.org/blog/creating-consensus-targeted-universalism>.

<sup>50</sup> See: <https://equity.cps.edu/tools>.

<sup>51</sup> The first three-year vision statement was due to sunset in spring 2019, and would have been updated under any circumstances.

by mid-2018 in parallel with the drafting of the Equity Framework. This created opportunities to coordinate the research and consultation processes for both frameworks in ways that would strengthen the vision's capacity to sharpen equity opportunities in the daily work of district staff, while also enlisting and persuading community and philanthropic stakeholders of the need to fund and support equity initiatives at all district levels. To advance the capacity of a revised vision Framework to support a more compelling equity agenda, several improvements were introduced into the vision design process.

First, and building on the first vision process's well received public consultation strategy, the CEO Office once again engaged Dr. Jackson in a community "listening tour" in sessions held throughout the city. The CEO and senior executive officers also convened representatives of Local School Councils from every school, providing another avenue of outreach to parents and community members. Principal, Teacher, Parent and Student Advisory Councils were consulted extensively for input and draft reviews. And webinars were employed to orient and train principals and network chiefs around implications of the revised vision to their work before the official launch. Second, the CEO staff collaborated with the district's strategically revamped not-for-profit foundation, the Children First Fund (CFF)<sup>52</sup>, to conduct targeted outreach to the City's not-for-profit and philanthropic community at a level well beyond what had been attempted for the first vision statement. Using a sophisticated range of enlistment and communication strategies, CFF's charge was to proactively organize discussions with Chicago funders around the vision priorities in order to increase philanthropic alignment to CPS priorities while enhancing funders' confidence in the accountability and transparency of CPS in utilizing philanthropic dollars. Innovations like the Visionary Voice convenings, used to launch the new five-year vision in March 2019, reflected the CEO's view that unregulated solicitation of grant dollars was as threatening to strategic coherence as lack of alignment between central office departments and schools.<sup>53</sup>

Third, in collaboration with Urban Labs, the CEO team and SQMR took a more sophisticated approach to the development of the five-year vision's primary goals, and particularly to how the target metrics were calibrated against current data trends. As Deputy Chief of Staff Eva Giglio remembered it, the three-year vision goals had been calculated as a simple, predictive trend line, and had yielded some disappointing results. "We should have known before the data came out if we were going to make the goal or not and which of our strategies were going to get us there or not. This was a multi-year goal. And that was a frustrating moment for me." Urban Labs facilitated a more strategic conversation with CPS policy makers based on system aspirations and trend lines differentiated further by baseline levels in different school categories. As another CPS participant, Senior Manager of Strategic Initiatives Bridget Lee observed, the resulting metric system "...allows us to not just set these big bold district goals, but unpack what that means for all of the schools...benefits we got from that were that not only do we have our district goals, but schools have individual goals that take their context into consideration, which is powerful for buy-in." This marked a distinct step forward in the calibration of benchmark goals that could be applied as well to goal setting within strategic plans.

As a vehicle for amplifying the district's strategic commitment to equity, the resulting five-year vision framework exhibits several strengths (see [Exhibit 36](#)). First, the document elevates the visibility of equity in the context of a rising and compelling record of recent successes in closing achievement gaps and advancing the success of historically underserved children. Doubling down on equity then is a proactive

<sup>52</sup> See: <https://www.childrenfirstfund.org/>. Also: <https://www.causeiq.com/organizations/children-first-fund-the-chicago-public-schools-fou.364094830/>.

<sup>53</sup> The CFF played an important role as well in organizing central office, network, and school staff around a more disciplined approach to funding solicitation. As Dr. Jackson described it: "The CFF Director made CFF a one-stop shop. She trained our staff extensively. We had to get to a point where everybody wasn't talking to funders without coordination. It was just wild and unorganized. She helps organize that. And she's done a much better job with presentation and information sharing with our website, with the Visionary Voices sessions where people come and learn together. It's not one foundation person talking to one chief office and then having more information than other funders. Everybody gets the information about post-secondary at the same time. Everybody gets the information about early childhood at the same time."

response to improvement rather than a reactive response to failure. Second, the category “community partnership” joins the list of district core beliefs. Vignettes about equity successes and strategies are peppered throughout the document, with frequent shout-outs to partner organizations which collaborated effectively to advance those efforts. These are often tagged to the logo of the Children First Fund with an invitation to readers to explore current opportunities to participate and contribute. Third, the new vision logo maintains the same “apple” motif, but is altered distinctively from SY 2017, with “equity” now encompassing the same three broad priorities: academic progress, fiscal stability, and integrity. This is elaborated in a full two pages introducing the new Equity Office and previewing the framework, with particular attention to supporting the academic success of young men of color, and stressing the need to align policies and partnerships around the district’s equity goals. Explicit references to equity goals are highlighted in most of the sections devoted to the three broad priorities. Fourth, the document highlights nine ambitious academic progress goals at the beginning of the document, keyed to three academic transitions (Pre-K, Elementary & Secondary), and prominently lists sub-goals with a clear relevance to racial equity.

Finally, several initiatives were underway to create more powerful systems and structures to address specific generators of inequity around the district, and put teeth into the renewed vision’s goals and commitments. The Office of Talent’s “Opportunity Schools” Initiative, for example, targeted for intervention the 10% of schools in the district which annually experience the most difficulty filling their positions with highly qualified teachers, while also posting the district’s highest teacher attrition rates. The identification of these schools started with their hiring data, but then expanded to principal interviews to determine the specific issues impacting hiring – all undertaken as part of Talent’s SY 2019 strategic plan. A staff member hired specifically to monitor these roughly 50 schools then engaged the principals to bring extra resources to bear at the point of hire, while working with Instructional Leadership Teams on improved teacher supports to reduce attrition.

Another data-driven initiative, the Annual Regional Analysis (or ARA), began as an effort to create “...a transparent source of data on student choice, district enrollment, and school performance information,”<sup>54</sup> with particular attention to better understanding inequitable distributions of resources around the system. The effort was a collaboration between the CEO Office, the SQMR department, and Kids First Chicago, a Chicago non-profit devoted to issues of equity and school accessibility. Kids First brought extensive data analysis and dashboarding expertise to the project, developing and displaying previously unavailable data trends in school enrollment and quality across 16 research-based regions in the City. In partnership with the CPS Office of Innovation and Incubation, the ARA has become a core resource for an annual Request for Proposals (RFP) process designed to allow a wider range of parents and community groups from around the city to advocate for new programs in under-served schools and neighborhoods. In SY 2019 the RFP process supported the distribution of \$32 million in new academic programs to 32 schools throughout the city, reaching 17,000 students.<sup>55</sup> The recent move to re-situate the ARA within the Office of Planning and Data Management, a division of the Office of Portfolio Management, is intended to further advance the coherence of efforts to distribute premier programs like the International Baccalaureate and AP offerings more equitable around the city.

To summarize, the new five-year vision released in spring 2019 clearly signaled the district’s commitment to intensify strategic action and resource alignment around inequitable patterns of access, excellence, and advocacy. For the most part, the vision goals do not specify targets for racial sub-groups, which may reflect the relatively early stage of development of the Equity Office’s suite of equity strategies. But the intended link between achieving the vision goals and the Equity Office was made

<sup>54</sup> See Kids First Chicago website: <https://kidsfirstchicago.org/ara>.

<sup>55</sup> See CPS RFP process site: <https://www.cps.edu/about/non-district-school-management/academic-program-request-for-proposal/>.

explicit in ways that established ambitious expectations for the office and its staff. Moreover, the CEO Office followed the vision's release with a focused campaign to integrate the vision elements into district communications and continuous improvement routines. This campaign had three elements: first, to establish a normative practice, namely, that the vision logo and principles would lead any communication or presentation to any audience, internal or external, in ways that directly linked the specific content to a facet of the vision; second, to establish the expectation that strategic plans would include reference to relevant vision goals, and explicitly shape unit goals toward the furtherance of district-wide vision goals; and third, to annually report on progress on the extent of progress toward the five-year vision goals in a public-facing, evidence-based publication. All three elements were evident in district practices by spring 2020.

### **Enacting Convergence: Vision Collaboratives and the Curriculum Equity Initiative (CEI)**

From an early point in her district leadership, Dr. Jackson had introduced the concept of “convergence” as an advanced state of cross-functional collaboration that would assemble, integrate, and deploy ideas and resources from across district units and district levels in the service of school improvement and student success. While recognized early on as the aspirational pinnacle of the Collaboration Continuum (see page 19), the capacity to converge had entered the daily practice lexicon of central office leadership by 2018, and was understood as a functional extension of central office's deepening alignment around a common language, cadence, and toolset of continuous improvement practice. And while characterizations of the elements of convergence varied among those we interviewed, no central office leader wanted to be viewed as a siloed thinker or actor, and most welcomed opportunities to think collaboratively about the district's most intractable problems. Further, the fact that strategic planning templates required leaders to identify and enact partnerships with other CPS units and capable external organizations meant that leaders would be evaluated in part on their capacity to achieve priority goals through targeted collaborative means. Slowly but substantively, potent examples of multi-unit collaboration were pushing the concept of convergence from the realm of aspiration into more grounded practice.

During the CEO period, as the capacity to drive disciplined implementation and continuous improvement strategies matured, district leaders accelerated the development of several innovative systems that integrated the efforts of several departments, and addressed issues of equity, customer service, and academic success at a system-wide scale. GoCPS and the High School Strategy were among the first examples to emerge from the CEEdO period, building design confidence and yielding a range of valuable lessons about the management of cross-functional, collaborative processes. Here we review two examples of pushing the edge of the envelope around convergence in the CEO period.

***Vision Collaboratives.*** An on-going concern of Dr. Jackson and her team in the area of vision-setting involved how to make the vision “alive” and “real” in the mindsets and strategic priorities of CPS staff at all three district levels. This became even more pressing in spring 2019 as the new five-year vision staked out accountability for a complete set of ambitious goals indexed to specific metrics and targets. In theory, the district's intensive work on strategic planning and continuous improvement was designed to propel, and to a degree, co-align the efforts of central office departments and network offices around goals such as an increased high school graduation rate. But central office discussions among staff leading the CI effort surfaced at least two limitations of the current CI structure as a catalyst for sustained convergence across departments toward vision goals. In particular, while the alignment of all departments around common CI routines and structures had indeed created a nascent community of CI practice, the accountability focus of CI on department performance continued to reinforce a degree of siloed activity within units, as well as the likely duplication of effort across department plans. In this regard complex processes of annual strategic planning could be a double-edged sword for advancing convergence, in that leanly staffed departments could easily feel pressed to under-invest in external partnerships in favor of concentrating internal resources on accomplishing their priority goals. Partly as a result, the CEO



consistently noticed in strategic plans at all three district levels a lack of connection between the vision goals and often idiosyncratic unit goals. It appeared that some supra-departmental structure would be necessary to converge departments on the achievement of vision goals within the district's five-year timeframe.

In response to this challenge, the CEO team posed a fundamental question: "How do we ensure that ALL vision goals have clear lines of reporting and accountability" (see [Exhibit 37, Slide 2](#)). They proposed to commission "Vision Collaboratives" (VCs) to adapt the district's CI toolbox to identifying powerful levers for advancing vision goals among departments and teams with a common stake in a broad area of district practice. The initial framing for VCs closely paralleled the broad grade-level structure of the five-year vision: Early childhood, elementary, high school, and post-secondary. This approach also allowed the design team to capitalize on momentum among a few grass-roots efforts at cross-departmental convergence that had formed over the last two years as a result of funded cross-sector projects in Early Childhood, Early Literacy, and among several departments working on metrics in the early college and career space. Through Fall 2019 and into winter 2020 several other preliminary steps were taken to establish a foundation for these collaboratives:

- Creating a dedicated, cross-functional staff position within the CEO Office to organize the introduction of the VC proposal to central office staff, coordinate with CI-focused staff in the Office of Network Supports, and eventually to facilitate VC meetings toward the development of strategic plans keyed to a "common agenda"<sup>56</sup> for addressing their respective vision goals;
- Completing a cross-walk of SY 2020 department strategic plans with each vision goal to identify the departments across central office most implicated in the accomplishment of respective vision Goals;
- Further cross-walking the SY 2020 department strategic plans to the Equity Framework as well as the School Excellence Framework to assure that each VC's strategic plans for each vision goal is aligned to "high impact practices that drive improvement of specific metrics"<sup>57</sup>;
- A governance structure defining a distribution of Cabinet and Executive team members in lead roles across the four VCs, a meeting cadence and typical agenda structure, and a quarterly reporting format as a standard deliverable to the CEO and district Cabinet;
- Bridging structures to CPS operations departments to assure articulation between VC strategies and appropriate allocations in the categories of "people, time and money"
- A bridging structure to the CPS Office of Innovation & Incubation (I&I) to assure inclusion of charter organization perspectives within each VC
- On-going communication and outreach of VC leaders to key central office CEO and CEoO meetings (e.g. Academic Leadership Team (ALT) monthly and SLT quarterly meetings) to apprise all senior staff of the progress and challenges facing all four VCs.

At this writing, the process of organizing central office for VC participation was still in preliminary stages, involving several organizing Zoom meetings among potential VC collaborators as part of a "Vision Partner Series." Our interviews surfaced broad support and appreciation for the need for some effective cross-functional structures to coordinate the strategic plans and implementation strategies linked to the vision goals. Asked whether she thought there was any reticence among central office staff about a global concept like convergence, one department director reflected, "Is there cynicism around this notion? I think the naming of Vision Collaboratives is very smart, right? I think the notion of convergence also is new and has a shiny-ness to it...I haven't seen cynicism around the idea of convergence."

<sup>56</sup> Drawing upon materials from the Collective Impact Forum, a "common agenda" is understood to include: a) a shared vision for change; b) a common understanding of the problem; c) clear, measurable goals; d) high-level strategies and a strategic action framework to achieve those goals. See: <https://www.collectiveimpactforum.org/resources/collaborating-create-common-agenda>.

<sup>57</sup> See: [Vision Implementation: Vision Collaboratives](#) (CPS SQMR Powerpoint; Slide 6; September 2019)

But three significant levels of challenge were surfaced as well. The first involved potential friction between meeting the demands of daily department-level work and new VC learning demands. “I think everybody agrees...with the concept of having to support the larger vision goals,” one senior staffer observed. “I think the challenge is really going to become how that applies to everybody's individual work. And what I mean by how that applies is, how it's translated and how we implement that in our day to day and our existing continuous improvement structures.” Another mid-level staffer, citing the “essential pain that we talk about all the time,” was more direct in his concerns: “Like every meeting for the last six weeks we've talked about what the hell is convergence and what's the strategic plan and what are these Vision Collaboratives and wait, equity - now you want us to talk about equity too? And then I go back to my desk, and somebody wants, you know, [*last minute deliverable named*] by the end of the day.” A second challenge also underscored concerns about overload and potential redundancy, but at the inter-departmental level, as central offices encouraged their constituent departments to meet regularly and coordinate their annual strategic planning processes. As a deputy program director in a highly collaborative office reflected, “So we have all of these different working groups. But how do we ensure that there's not duplication of work, and that there is just a convening of what decisions have been made in either group...I almost feel as though we need to think about and see if these groups need to morph or combine because it's the same people.”

Finally, questions arose over how the VCs would avoid becoming central office focused, at the cost of adequate representation of Network Office and school voices. One central office staffer wondered, “I think internally, like what is the structure of these Vision Collaboratives and how do we make sure that network chiefs and academic chiefs are a part of these collaboratives in a way that feels equitable in a sense...that there is equal representation with the schools and the central office.” These and related complexities posed by the challenge to mount a supra-level of strategic planning across multiple departments were not lost on the CEO Office's Vision Collaboratives point-person Bridget Lee. But she remained optimistic about the VC's essential viability. “If we know what levers we are trying to pull to change these outcomes and we're clear about that then that will allow for the teams to be more clear about how they support that, because we have to be operationally excellent to do these big bold things that we're trying to do...It's going to take a lot of work and a lot of steps, but I think we can get there.”

***The Curriculum Equity Initiative.*** During the CEoO period one of the more alarming realizations to come from organized instructional rounds were glaring gaps in the quality of instruction and curricula available to students in varied corners of the city. At the time, LaTanya McDade was Chief of Teaching and Learning. As she recalled, “Teaching and Learning was in a place where they really didn't have a strong presence in terms of governance over what strong curriculum, instruction and assessment should be in the district...I realized that there were some deep inequities in access to high quality curriculum throughout the district and that...there was a need to do something about that.” In addition, recent surveys of teacher practices were revealing the extent to which teachers used their own time to source curricular materials from the internet, often at their own expense and with minimal assurance of quality.<sup>58</sup> For her part Dr. Jackson was convinced that online technologies held the key to helping the district address these disparities at scale, while also converging departments around the common problems of sharpening the district's instructional frameworks and modes of professional learning. “The big challenge has always been how do we implement something district-wide and have it show up in every school and every classroom. We've relied on a train-the-trainer model in past efforts. I'm hoping with the CEI that we build something stronger and since it is accessible online, I think it has a little bit more staying power and sustainability. It will allow us to pivot and implement.”

<sup>58</sup> According to the May 1, 2019 presentation to the CPS Board of Education, more than one-third of CPS teachers polled that year spent five or more hours per week searching for curricular materials for their classes, primarily through internet outlets (slide 12). Over 42% of CPS teachers indicated that their school did not have curriculum in the subject areas they taught (slide 9).

Several steps were taken to explore options to create this infrastructure through 2018. First, Chief McDade and her team conducted a scan of district curriculum quality to verify the degree of variation in quality and coverage across central office departments and schools. Second, the team inventoried the range of approaches being taken by large American urban districts to leverage technology to make quality curricula available at scale. They followed with in-person consultations with several districts also building instructional management systems and “learning object repositories” to gather lessons learned and assess the feasibility of a Chicago project.<sup>59</sup> As preliminary assessments began to crystalize around a draft CPS plan, Dr. Jackson participated in at least one of these visits to assure herself of the potential value of what promised to be an expensive investment of time and treasure. Chief McDade also engaged her own Department of Curriculum, Instruction & Digital Learning (CIDL) to better grasp the state and focus of educational technology capability and use across the district, and assess the infrastructural readiness of CPS to create an interactive curricular repository. Core planning staff were hired in late 2018 and a core design and development plan drafted in winter 2019. These were vetted by Chief McDade and Dr. Jackson on a “roadshow” of school and network visits to further test principals’ and teachers’ responses to the idea. A final plan was presented to and approved by the Board of Education in May 2019 (see [Exhibit 38](#)), comprising a 6-year arc of development totaling \$140 million.

CEI is arguably the most audacious and complex design and development plan in the area of curriculum ever fielded by CPS, and a fully specified description of its elements and operation is beyond the scope of this brief profile. However, from the angle of enacting convergence, several features build from, extend, and elevate the district’s allied capacities and commitments bearing on instructional coherence, and warrant attention. To begin, in order to synthesize equity aims and curricular content, CEI integrates cross-functional development teams within subject areas that combine *subject matter experts*, or SMEs (e.g. English Language Arts team) with contractor/vendors, cross-curricular specialists (e.g. the Social-Emotional Learning or SPED teams), technical specialists (e.g. CIDL team), the Assessment Team, and subject area teacher-reviewers on the Curriculum Collaborative teams. Also present in subject area meetings are the CIDL project managers and curriculum designers to resolve conflicts, conserve meeting records, and regulate communications. While these role players execute specific functions, they also comprise a community of practice around general problem-solving as curricular modules evolve. Thus, from the perspective of crossing role and departmental boundaries, CEI team work uniquely subordinates department and project team interests to the imperative to sustain progress on tight production timelines. As one CPS observer of the process put it, “...people are beginning to see that the strategies they create are not created in a vacuum and they can’t do it without the work of other people.”

Further, CEI organizes team effort around a 12-step iterative design, feedback and improvement cycle that would challenge the capacity of any private sector organization, and clearly draws on the foundational capacity of central office staff to collaborate on and sustain strategic planning within their respective departments. [Exhibit 39](#) describes and depicts these steps in detail, designed to be enacted over a roughly 6 week timeframe. But the broad arc and cadence of a production cycle starts with decisions around basic unit content parameters among external vendors and CPS subject matter experts, followed by production of a draft unit by the vendors. First drafts are then reviewed by a “contractual compliance team” for inclusion of all required elements. At this point content quality review by content experts and Curriculum Collaborative teachers ensues, then feedback of reviews to vendors followed by further vendor improvements. Final rounds of review and feedback return to the contractual compliance team, followed by steps to mount the units to the Safari Montage content platform so that teachers in the

<sup>59</sup> Several instructive examples emerged, including the NYC Public Schools WeTeachNYC system, billed as “a central repository of learning objects, which is also open and available to the public, so even educators outside of New York City can benefit from the NYC DOE’s high-quality and curated teaching resources.” Comparable efforts were underway in Denver, Miami-Dade, Boston, and several other cities. For NYC, see: <https://www.blenderbox.com/project/weteachnyc>. At the state level, EngageNY makes digitized CCSS-aligned mathematics and English language arts curricula freely available via its website to all educators. See: <https://www.engageny.org/>.

broader community can access and further review the quality of the units. Feedback from this final step remains on-going, and the full digital content and resource system – dubbed “Skyline” (see [Exhibit 39](#), p. 3) - allows teachers to offer supplementary material to the unit for review and potential inclusion (a separate review loop). A final meta-review step considers the overall success of the production cycle across all units and vets suggested improvements for inclusion in the process and its governing protocols. Overall, given the learning demands and tight timelines of CEI production cycles, it is difficult to imagine executing these production cycles without considerable experience with and confidence in well-established dispositions and practices of CI implementation at the department level. As CEo LaTanya McDade recognized:

*...when you see the production cycle, it's continuous improvement. We identified the problem, we collected tons of data both nationally and locally for this project. And then looking at the production cycles, they're iterative. It's not that they are giving us curriculum - there's a process by which it's developed. The teacher collaborative then uses a measurement, maybe a rubric for quality, to take a deep look at curriculum, provide feedback. The vendor then then goes back and uses that feedback to make adjustments, which is really unusual. And even then, it comes back to us even before it hits what we call the streets. And even when it does hit the street, we still have curriculum designers that continue to make improvements along the way and that continues, long after the vendors have completed their contractual obligations.*

Although the immediate intent of CEI seems to center on the creation of a learning object repository, the vision of CEI aims to elevate and align quality within the entire instructional core. While partner vendors focus primarily on curricular content, CPS subject matter experts draw upon sources such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the TRU (Teaching for Robust Understanding) instructional framework to align instructional guidance to the content units, along with MTSS and Illinois and Common Core standards. The role of the CPS Office of Student Assessment, in turn, is to monitor the quality of formative and summative assessments and test item banks designed by Illuminate Education and mounted on a dedicated “student assessment platform,” so that teachers are provided with a reliable starting point for tracking student learning and growth. Finally, the ambition of the full Skyline system is to link all curricular, instructional, and assessment resources within a “one-stop” digital platform that integrates access to the district’s primary student information systems and other digital tools. Through a core partnership with the IMS Global Learning Consortium, this system should function “interoperatively” so that all tools can be accessed at the school level from any laptop or digital device. The goal is “reliable, secure, and equitable access to media for administrators, teachers, and students.”<sup>60</sup>

CEI also engages the expertise of external partners in ways that reflect considerable *absorptive capacity* within the district, and significantly extend CPS’ ability to achieve its equity aims. Farrell & Coburn (2017), following Cohen and Levinthal (1990), define absorptive capacity as “...the ability to recognize the value of new information, assimilate it, and apply it in novel ways as part of organizational routines, policies, and practices.” In the case of engaging external partners, they identify four organizational characteristics that mediate a district’s capacity to shape and learn from partner interactions: *prior related knowledge* in the target areas of common focus; *pathways of communication* facilitating a steady flow of information; *strategic knowledge leadership* that continually assesses the relevance and quality of informational exchange; and *strategic resources* to coordinate and integrate interactions (see p. 136). These features are prominent in the way that CEI determined the district’s informational and learning needs in the lead-up to design, and structured interactions with partners once design and implementation was underway.

<sup>60</sup> See “Top-down and all around: How Chicago Public Schools is committing to IMS standards.” Powerpoint presentation to IMS Global Learning Consortium webinar, March 20, 2019. Link: <https://www.imsglobal.org/article/how-chicago-public-schools-committing-ims-standards-recorded-webinar>.

To illustrate, traditional contractual arrangements with large curriculum design organizations typically involve the “off the shelf” purchase of curricular packages with minimal customization to fit a district’s values, goals, or student demographics. Instead, CEI built its request for proposals around a collaborative model for curricular design in which expert contractors and CPS content teams would use rapid, iterative feedback loops to create and improve curricular modules. Five nationally regarded curricular design organizations were contracted for this work. To complement the broad content expertise of CPS central office specialists, CPS engaged partners such as EdReports.org and IMS Global Learning Consortium to govern the customization of curricular units through rubrics in areas like equity. The return on investment for the curriculum design vendors was the opportunity to learn how better to integrate considerations of cultural relevance, social-emotional learning, and special education into content modules, along with continued access to the CEI-generated content. Strong, distributed strategic knowledge leadership was deployed by CEo McDade in her pre-design assessment of district goals and knowledge needs, and by CEI managers in their on-going regulation of the resources, feedback processes, and quality reviews necessary to conclude production cycles and “drop” content for teacher use on the Skyline platform. Overall, while the early process of norming iterative collaborative design was “messy” and tense, involving mutual sense-making around matters of professional deference and accountability, our observations of CEI sessions suggested high levels of organizational learning across district and partner participants by winter 2020. And in some content area partnerships, a spirit of convergence certainly was emerging in consistent practices of knowledge exchange, mutual accountability, collegial transparency, and professional deference in meetings and intervening communications.

### **What Have We Learned? Reprising our Research Questions**

We may now return to our original six research questions (introduced on page 11), and consider how consequential this program of capacity development has been for CPS’ ability to realize its ambitious goals and vision.

#### **RQ1. What were the origins and progenitors of the approach to institutional revitalization that the CEO and her team designed and enacted from mid-2015 through the start of 2020? How did she combine varied influences into a coherent change management strategy?**

The body of evidence points to three primary progenitors and sources of influence on Dr. Jackson’s practice of change management around the institutionalization of continuous improvement strategies. First, one cannot understate the significance of the district’s prior experiment with a district-wide implementation of a performance management (PM) regime, roughly six years before Dr. Jackson’s arrival as CEo. On the one hand, it was widely acknowledged that CEO Huberman’s design for PM pivoted the professional culture of CPS decidedly in the direction of evidence-based decision making at a time when such an approach was fast acquiring currency among policy makers and funders nationally. In this regard PM circa 2009 continued to advance CPS’ national reputation as an innovator in creating data infrastructure for improvement purposes. And it socialized an entire generation of CPS school leaders – Dr. Jackson included – into routines of data use, public accountability, and annual strategic planning which could provide a foundation for a renewed CI effort. It is significant that pockets of PM practice continued to persist around the district well after the departure of Mr. Huberman in 2009. In addition, the Huberman PM archive provided the new CEo team with field-tested routines, protocols and tools that could be adapted and re-purposed to advance new continuous improvement processes. At the same time, it was the general consensus in our interviews that key features of PM implementation through 2009 undercut morale and relational trust among CPS staff to a significant degree. This legacy created an opening for the new CEo (and later CEO) to propose alternative structures and routines incentivizing inquiry and learning in pursuit of envisioned goals. Dr. Jackson’s alternative vision for PM as continuous learning did not immediately dispel all anxiety. But it did buy time to socialize central office chiefs and department leaders into leadership practices designed to incentivize more sustained and in-depth analysis

of problems of practice obstructing supports for school improvement at the central office level. In this regard, the recent if problematic history of PM in 2008-2009 was a net affordance for re-rooting PM practices in a continuous improvement mode beginning in 2015.

Second, Dr. Jackson's extensive formal preparation as a school and district leader deepened the intellectual capital she brought to her new executive roles, at a time when new proposals and research regarding the organization of large-scale continuous improvement were emerging (e.g. Bryk et al., 2015). This preparation included extensive reading in the both the general and school-specific literatures of organizational change management, leadership development and distribution, leadership for instructional coherence, and the organization of disciplined professional learning in support of school improvement. Moreover, a few guiding supra-constructs emerged from our interviews with the CEO and her senior leadership team that were central to how she synthesized these ideas into a coherent vision and strategy. These included Peter Senge's rendering of the continuously improving learning organization, rooted in a capacity for systems thinking (Senge, 1990). The "four disciplines" proposed to develop the learning organization – vision, mental models, team learning, and personal mastery – are themselves integrated through a "fifth discipline," systems thinking, an analytic propensity to seek patterns within the inter-related elements of systems or situations. All five of these elements are robustly represented in Dr. Jackson's organizational change strategy, with systems thinking central to her development of senior staff. As she noted, "I'm more interested in having a core of people who think that continuous improvement is important. And the reason that is important to me is because I think it helps you to become a better systems thinker, which I think is critically important."

Also evident in her practice was Richard Elmore's understanding of "reciprocal accountability" as a balance between the willingness of system members to be evaluated on their quality of practice, on the one hand, and the commitment of district leaders and systems to adequately support staff to learn to improve. For Dr. Jackson, the practice and design of reciprocal accountability at all three levels of the district was both strategic and ethical. Ethical in that her experience of prior accountability regimes within CPS too often drove heightened performance expectations without the deployment of well-resourced and conceptualized professional learning systems to build staff capacity to meet them. Strategic in that attention to establishing reciprocal accountability creates conditions for deepening staff commitment to "the work," through reducing performance anxiety and elevating daily experiences of individual and collective efficacy. A third supra-ordinate construct for Dr. Jackson involved the cultivation of "relational trust," defined by Bryk and Schneider (2002) as a property of organizations in which "Each party in a role relationship maintains an understanding of his or her role obligations and holds some expectations about the role obligations of the other" (p. 20). Conditions supporting risk, innovation, and advanced learning become more likely when organization members can rely on others to interact with respect, fulfill their respective roles competently, exhibit personal regard for others, and act with integrity (pp. 24-25). Attention to building relational trust was evident particularly in Dr. Jackson's practice of *strategic transparency*, which we characterized as proactive, public acknowledgement of district failings and shortcomings (integrity) coupled with an organized presentation of strategies to correct the situation (competence). Multiple outreach and communication strategies, often personalized by the CEO and coupled with substantive solicitation of stakeholder input, were effective strategies for enacting dynamics of respect and personal regard.

Finally, it is important to note that CPS' program of capacity building in continuous improvement has emerged at a moment of considerable expansion in the research knowledge base regarding large urban districts and CI practice (Dixon & Eddy Spicer, 2018; Whalen, 2019). This literature includes detailed accounts of school district efforts to transform and align central office functions to better support school improvement (e.g. Honig, 2014); school district sponsorship of research-practice partnerships to accelerate learning and innovation processes outside of daily district administrative routines (e.g., Penuel, Coburn & Gallagher, 2013; Cobb et al., 2018); studies of effective learning routines in teacher team

settings, integrating multiple data analysis routines targeted to the instructional core (e.g., Panero & Talbert, 2013); and the application of Improvement Science methodologies to support rapid innovation in networked improvement communities, among schools and among districts (e.g., LeMahieu et al., 2017). Frameworks, concepts, and template tools from these literatures were available to the CEO and SQMR teams throughout the study period to help guide re-design efforts, particularly in the socialization of staff to continuous improvement mindsets and routines. Examples in the study include the engagement of external expertise to help incorporate root cause analysis and gap analysis to strategic planning routines, and the incorporation of Improvement Science readings (e.g., *Learning to Improve* by Bryk et al., 2015) and principles into professional learning modules for central office staff in SY 2018. Staff recruited specifically to advance training and implementation of CI structures and routines were influential agents in identifying and introducing cutting-edge CI concepts and resources into the shared language of CPS continuous improvement practice.

**RQ2. What structures, routines, and tools (or SRT) were developed to enact the CEO’s vision for continuous improvement and district transformation, and in particular, the enactment of continuous improvement processes? How were these SRT adapted and improved over time?**

The evidence is unequivocal that the design, development and iterative improvement of *structures, routines, and tools* (or SRT, below) was of central concern to Dr. Jackson and her team as *the* core strategy and structural spine for district transformation. Not only did new SRT anchor major shifts in the pace, cadence, forms, and foci of daily workstreams and modes of interaction in CPS as a workplace. But they incorporated and communicated values, norms, goals and expectations around professional practice that clearly bore on how central office, district staff, and even parents and community members experienced themselves as employees and stakeholders. A short list of the most consequential SRT arising in this study would certainly include:

- A wide range of *collaborative work structures* designed to enact phases of CI planning, inquiry, and goal implementation (e.g., weekly department meetings, the annual sequence of “Beginning-Middle-End” of year progress review meetings, Vision Collaborative convenings, Office-level convenings of department and program leads, and cross-functional team meetings in initiatives like CEI);
- A wide range of collective and small group *learning structures and designs*, including webinars; training sessions; sub-elements of Cabinet and senior leadership team meetings organized for informational presentations, discussion, and reflection; and meetings organized for leadership development and evaluative feedback such as the CEO’s bi-weekly check-ins;
- **Frameworks** are particularly salient to Dr. Jackson’s leadership approach. A framework refers to a basic conceptual structure and set of principles for organizing a domain of work to which the organization will make a commitment of time, effort and resources. Under Dr. Jackson’s leadership, framework statements typically included a normative rationale for the work, its importance to the district’s educational mission, problems of practice to be addressed, an outline of a strategic plan of action, and measurable goals (e.g. CPS vision statements; framework documents in equity, continuous improvement, literacy)
- **Routines** within particular structures, defined by Spillane & Coldren (2013) as “social interactions among two or more organizational members who act interdependently” toward an organizational goal (p. 54). Routines typically are stable and patterned procedures for accomplishing collaborative tasks, and in this study have included shared scripts for enacting after-action or “middle of year” reviews, making PowerPoint presentations, conducting a risk management discussion in an Executive Cabinet meeting, or providing “hot and cool” feedback in a RISE evaluation session;
- **Protocols and tools**, being artifacts and other “representations of ideas that people use in their practice” as means to goal accomplishment (Spillane & Coldren, 2013, p. 40). Great effort was accorded the design of protocols (often encoding routines) and tools (to direct and amplify action)

(e.g. iterations of the Strategic Planning templates; Google note-catchers, meeting agendas, discussion guides;

- **Key systems** constituting the district’s data and procedural infrastructure, each articulating to and supporting the enactment of routines and tool use (examples: GoCPS; ASPEN Student Information System; Lead with CPS; Lead, Learn, Succeed; CEI’s Curricular Object Repository).

Regarding how SRT and related CI artifacts were adapted and improved, the CEo/CEO teams progressively developed a set of meta-structures and routines for evaluating the performance of CI structures, and improving routines and artifacts supporting continuous improvement. Over time the application of these improvement routines with transparency helped convince CPS staff as CI end-users that their input was valued, and that the primary criterion for judging SRT use was their efficacy in supporting successful CI practice at the department and cross-department levels. Elements of the improvement system included:

- Establishing cross-functional roles devoted to the design and implementation of CI artifacts, along with hiring of staff with prior design and deployment experience in comparable complex organizations (beginning with Jacare Thomas in the CEo period)
- Evaluating the in-situ performance of CI SRT through targeted, mixed method studies, using observational, survey, and interview/consultative data gathering tools
- Situating the review of the results of these evaluations in leadership learning settings to accentuate the intention to improve the CI toolkit in response to user feedback
- Seeking additional critical feedback around CI tools and structures in learning settings like the Executive Cabinet
- Soliciting and welcoming SRT design innovations from CI users and sharing these as options for practice in public settings (e.g. in Senior Leadership Team meetings).
- Seeking externally designed tools where appropriate to advance CI capabilities, and in particular, the capacity to link and articulate strategic plans across the three primary levels of CI practice in the district – a work in progress.

Why did Dr. Jackson and her team invest so intensively in the design and improvement of structures, routines, and tools (SRT) both in the allied areas of strategic planning, continuous improvement, and leadership development? Our evidence points toward two closely braided reasons. First, from the angle of “crafting coherence” around the instructional core, designing a common framework for SRT provided the resources and media necessary to bring the central office, network offices, and individual schools into greater alignment, closer communication, and more powerful coordination. Optimal alignment at “enterprise scale” in this context was less about all units performing the same CI routines at the same time, and more about assuring a timely flow of relevant and accurate information between networks of collaborators linking the different levels (Johnson et al., 2015; Cobb et al., 2018). Within the emerging concept of (and aspiration toward) a “unitary platform” for strategic planning, for example, structures would need to coordinate so that information about available services and resources was evident to schools, and schools’ service needs could quickly become evident to central office departments. This dance would be considerably facilitated by regular improvement cycles aimed at communication tools and routines bridging actors at the three levels.

Second, from the angle of social and situated learning, a primary challenge facing Dr. Jackson involved displacing traditional bureaucratic mindsets of compliance and siloed, privatized practice in central office with a new set of widely shared collaborative norms characteristic of a community of practice (or CP). Strong communities of practice typically configure SRT to engender shared values, transmit shared models of practice excellence, and induct new members into learning relationships with expert practitioners (Spillane & Coldren, 2011; Talbert et al., 2012). In learning to improve practice and sense-make problems through the shared agency of well-designed SRT, community members experience



themselves as both purposeful and skillful, and displace compliance motives with a more personal and normative identification with the goals and aspirations of the organization. While this is obviously an idealized depiction of how SRT function within a CP, it nonetheless resonates with the pervasive expressions of collective efficacy and mission identification that were common among our central office interview subjects.

Our case evidence supports the claim, then, that progressively more competent participation in a common culture of CI mediated by carefully designed SRT contributed to enhanced collective efficacy and mission identification in CPS central office. Throughout the study this was reflected in the confidence expressed by central office leaders in their collective capacity to design and execute complex system initiatives such as CEI, GoCPS, and the development of the Annual Regional Analysis. Inversely, however, limitations in the design of SRT, particularly in terms of learning and work demands, proved to be hindrances to these same experiences, and were occasionally the focus of dissatisfaction among central office leaders. This was particularly the case with the SY 2020 strategic planning protocol which incorporated the full range of intermediate inquiry steps (including the statement of priority goals; present and future/envisioned situations; root cause and gap analyses; theory of action statements, implementation steps and metrics, and outcome metrics) that had layered on to the CI process in the effort to encourage deeper collective inquiry over the two successive years of CI SRT design. The ponderousness of the tool threatened to push collective thinking in some departments back into a compliance mode, and feedback from Cabinet chiefs counseled some streamlining of the inquiry steps. For CEO team designers, the challenge was to acknowledge the need to find a better delivery design for the strategic planning template, while holding Chiefs and department directors accountable for engaging their teams in the intended inquiry and collaborative planning activities - another variation on the ubiquitous challenge of sustaining reciprocal accountability while implementing complex reforms.

**RQ3. What contextual factors, internal and external to CPS, were affordances for the realization of the CEO’s vision and strategic initiatives? What contextual factors challenged, constrained, or obstructed these initiatives?**

The Chicago Public Schools is a complex and multi-layered system nested within an equally complex metropolitan and political context. The school system and its surrounding context are continually interacting to shape the envisioned agendas and strategic priorities of CPS leaders. Consistent with our characterization of system complexity at the outset of this case, CPS leaders with any historical perspective must know to anticipate the unexpected, and build capacity to respond deftly to serious unforeseen challenges. Dr. Jackson’s experience of the history of CEO derailments, including that of her predecessor, prompted her to mobilize her executive team around a risk mitigation strategy to surface as many looming threats as possible to her internal agenda for crafting instructional coherence. At the same time Dr. Jackson was aware that some contextual features were aligned to assist and advance her strategic agenda as CEEdO, and was attentive to channeling or cultivating those features to further advantage.

We have already considered one of those factors internal to CPS in some detail, that is, the district’s experiment with performance management structures a few years prior to the Jackson era. This short-lived but intensive initiative left a record of cautionary lessons specific to the CPS context, as well as an archive of tools and protocols, elements of a PM-oriented data infrastructure, and a cadre of rising leaders among Dr. Jackson’s contemporaries who were prepared to engage with her in a re-design of PM for continuous improvement purposes. While the PM legacy might have given other CEOs pause, in Dr. Jackson’s hands this history proved to be a net affordance for introducing norms and routines of collaborative professional inquiry that central office staff could experience as a contrast to the prior, punitive model. This paved the way for the development of a leadership cadre in central office with a growing collective will to sustain and improve CI culture and practices beyond the tenure of CEO Jackson. Some others of the most potent affordances for her agenda included:

***The Socio-Political Context – the Imperative to Engage Issues of Equity and Justice.*** The second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the United States has witnessed a steady escalation of contention and conflict around matters of racial and economic justice (Payne, 2008; DiAngelo, 2018; Loury, 2019). In Chicago long-standing patterns of racial segregation by neighborhood and widening income and resource gaps have manifested as chronically high levels of violence in racially isolated communities, shifts in city demographics due to Black depopulation, bitter contention over school closings in under-resourced minority communities, and chronic achievement gaps particularly evident among African-American males (Diamond, 2017; Ewing, 2018; Todd-Breland, 2018). While these conditions are troubling, they also are aligned to Dr. Jackson’s biographic profile as a rising and authentic Chicago leader, her strong sense of moral imperative around the social justice bases for instructional coherence and parental choice, and her personal drive to transform district workways around principles of customer service and support for local school improvement. To the degree that Dr. Jackson drew energy and resolve from reserves of moral and professional determination, it was because her pride in and commitment to CPS and public education was affronted by the persistence of disparities in the educational experiences and outcomes of minority children.

***CPS as a Portfolio Strategy District at a Crossroads.*** Over the past 30 years CPS has adopted many of the signature features of a “portfolio strategy,” and overlain them atop other features of decentralized, democratic reforms such as Local School Councils. Portfolio approaches typically emphasize the adoption of competitive market structures and dynamics to drive school improvement, leveraging parental choice, school chartering, student-based budgeting formulas, marketing communication, and external management organizations to frame competition among schools. To varying degrees, the primary roles of central district offices are to organize professional learning and other resources for school improvement, recruit and develop talent for teaching and school leadership, implement data-driven performance management regimes to distinguish and publish levels of school performance for use by school consumers, and manage relations with government and other system stakeholders. Within this approach accountability pressures historically have focused most intently on staff at the school level, often with minimal regard for the challenges to pedagogy posed by conditions in under-funded urban schools engaging the highest needs students and communities (Payne, 2008; Lipman, 2013). At the same time, recent evaluations in Chicago and nationally call into question both the results and the collateral damage of portfolio strategies, with rising resistance from teacher unions and community organizations to the diminishment of neighborhood school options (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Ewing, 2018).

While this governance context could be fraught with tension for a district CEO, it also posed opportunities for Dr. Jackson as an *ideological boundary-spanner* (van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2019). On the one hand, having grown up as a CPS leader within the portfolio strategy, Dr. Jackson broadly reflected its values and mindsets. These included validation of parent choice as an improvement vector; strong belief in the value of school accountability systems in supporting parent choice and school improvement; advocacy of rational management structures based in strategic planning and metrics-based goal-setting; and support for balanced but rigorous performance evaluations for teachers, principals, and administrative staff.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, Dr. Jackson applied an equity lens to the limitations of charter

<sup>61</sup> Regarding the linkage between parent choice, school accountability ratings, and equity, Dr. Jackson explained: “We do have an obligation - I will never be okay with not telling people how a school is performing. Even as we go through this SQRP 3.0 process, there are some principles that I’m going to hold dear as long as I’m in charge. We are going to publicize data because the public deserves to know and we are going to make sure that parents are aware of the quality of the school. We are going to make sure that people have choice, that if they aren’t happy with the quality of the school, that they can pick a different school. Those are things I personally and deeply believe in and I would have trouble leading without those things being there. I believe that school choice is an example of equity. When I was growing up, while we went to our neighborhood grammar school, but none of us, me or my four siblings, none of us went to our neighborhood high school. Our parents were exercising choice before they knew what it was. They just knew they didn’t want their kids to go to the neighborhood high school because at the time the neighborhood high school, which eventually closed, was not the school for us. So we went to selective enrollment schools and programs.”

reform and school closings, resisted the claims of powerful corporate funders to drive CPS priorities, and saw systematic continuous improvement as a more reliable route to school improvement than the application of market dynamics in already under-resourced minority communities. Given her deep understanding of how cross-cutting ideological influences impacted the daily decision-making of CPS school leaders, Dr. Jackson's hybrid ideological profile positioned her to bridge and broker in good faith between varied district constituencies, while buffering her primary agenda around instructional coherence from interference or co-option. As she framed it, "I think there's been some missed opportunities with the political space, and I go back and forth on that because on the one hand, I know it's important and it's a part of the job. And I don't shy away from that. But...I've made a conscious effort not to be a politician in this role. I am a superintendent. I intend to run CPS like a school system."

***Mayoral Control and its Implications.*** Since 1995 the Mayor of Chicago has wielded the balance of power over the governance of CPS, with power to appoint the CEO, CEo, and the Board of Education. Therefore, in Chicago a district CEO must be aligned to the mayor's core educational priorities in order to advance their own agenda for district development. As our evidence bears out, Janice Jackson managed to engage Mayor Rahm Emanuel and his staff in ways that helped her craft considerable autonomy in her oversight of the district's instructional agenda as CEo. In part this was a personal connection based on the Mayor's confidence in her direct style and knowledge of the district. The connection grew, though, as the Mayor's views on matters such as principal development, charter and neighborhood school parity, and post-secondary planning increasingly converged with CEO Jackson's (Emanuel, 2019).<sup>62</sup> This gave CEO Jackson significant political support to advance initiatives around principal evaluation, the more rigorous selection of principals and network chiefs, and improving (but not abandoning) the SQRP accountability system, along with undertaking major post-secondary initiatives such as Learn.Plan.Succeed and an ambitious partnership with City Colleges of Chicago. In turn, the CEO could count on generally positive interactions with the Board of Education appointed by the Mayor. To be sure, the election of 2018 and the critical comments of candidate Lightfoot regarding CEO Jackson temporarily threw Dr. Jackson's future into question.<sup>63</sup> However, the CEO's exercise of strategic transparency and proactive communication with the new Mayor and her staff were effective in forging a strong working alliance with Mayor Lightfoot and her new, reconfigured Board of Education. This alliance has continued to bolster Dr. Jackson's longer term strategic goals for district transformation.

***CPS' Legacy and Access to Partnerships.*** A clear affordance for key elements of Dr. Jackson's agenda was the district's experience with and confidence in engaging productively with capable external partner organizations. In this regard the district entered the Jackson era with high levels of *absorptive capacity* already established at the central office level by which to engage a capacity-rich community of potential partner-collaborators operating in the Chicago region. We see this capacity manifesting at two levels of the organization. First, there is the capacity to establish policy, contractual, and collaborative frameworks with external organizations so that the work they undertake is aligned to priority organizational goals and problems of practice. Second, there is the capacity to engage and learn from the expertise of external partners in ways that inform organization practice, or even transfer capability to the organization. The long-standing data-sharing relationship with the UChicago Consortium for School Research (CCSR), for example, provides CCSR with extensive access to CPS data systems in exchange for the commissioning of evaluative and prospective studies keyed to CPS priorities.<sup>64</sup> Second, CCSR staff are available to engage with CPS staff in sense-making conversations around the results of analyses and reports that do

<sup>62</sup> To read former Mayor Rahm Emanuel's reflections on the evolution of his thinking and policy priorities during his tenure, see: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/02/policymakers-need-new-path-education-reform/581995/>.

<sup>63</sup> For an overview of issues raised by mayoral candidate Lori Lightfoot in early spring 2019, see: <https://chicago.chalkbeat.org/2019/3/5/21106987/mayoral-candidate-lori-lightfoot-still-undecided-about-schools-chief-janice-jackson>.

<sup>64</sup> To review the range of issues covered by CCSR reports drawing upon CPS internal data sources, see: [https://consortium.uchicago.edu/district\\_and\\_policy](https://consortium.uchicago.edu/district_and_policy).

inform further policy decisions within the district. Examples include recent reports on the efficacy of GoCPS, a sustained program of studies of school improvement capabilities based on targeted CCSR analyses of their Five Essentials survey instrument, and recent critical studies of the long-term impacts of school closings in Chicago neighborhoods. Similarly, productive and knowledge-rich relationships were developed and extended in the Jackson era with the Northwestern University Kellogg School of Management, the University of Illinois at Chicago Center for Urban Education Leadership, Chapin Hall Center for Children, Chicago Public Education Fund, and the curriculum vendors contracted through the Curriculum Equity Initiative.

While these contextual factors yielded substantive advantages to Dr. Jackson's district transformation agenda, other features of the broader Chicago context proved problematic for her vision and strategic program at various points of time, including:

***Budgetary Turbulence and Demographic Challenges.*** Early in the case we noted the basic constraints on district administrative growth posed by a severe budget crisis beginning in 2015 and continuing through early 2017. As we saw, Dr. Jackson was able to exploit this crisis as an opportunity to reorient central office leaders to a framework for prioritization keyed to school improvement and the instructional core. But the larger budgetary context remains seriously constrained for CPS, particularly in terms of growing administrative staff necessary to support a robust implementation of converged CI practices linking all three system levels effectively. While Illinois remains one of the tightest states in terms of education funding, CPS in 2019 was funded only to 64% of financial capacity to meet expectations, according to the Illinois State Board of Education.<sup>65</sup> While increases in state funding levels relieved some of this pressure in mid-2017, these constraints only threaten to deepen if declines in CPS student enrollment persist in the context of student-based funding formulas. This threat has been a prod toward technical innovation, as the development of the Annual Regional Analysis attests, and such investments often lead to unanticipated applications to other problems of practice. But they nonetheless lay claim to resources that otherwise might flow toward innovation closer to the technical core of instruction.

***Labor Turbulence and Administrative Disruption.*** While the Jackson era has featured several serious public crises and scandals, the CEO and her team have been successful in limiting their impact on the progress of the internal agenda to build continuous improvement capacity. This included heading off a potential CTU strike during the CEo period in 2016, a success that enhanced Dr. Jackson's reputation for acting as a good faith broker between constituencies in conflict. However, the acrimonious CTU strike of October 2019 did offer the CPS leadership team a more precipitous and complex challenge, resulting in a redeployment of central office staff throughout the district's schools and a disruption of most strategic planning and monitoring activities at the central office and network levels for the duration of the walk-out. The suspension of most central office activities for roughly two weeks did not derail the eventual re-start of scheduled continuous improvement meetings by the end of the year, while the December 2019 Senior Leadership Team meeting provided an opening to reinvigorate professional learning around CI processes. But the strike did briefly impede the momentum of CI development that had been achieved over the prior three years.

***Challenges of Professional Knowledge and Learning at Scale.*** It is widely acknowledged within the literature of instructional improvement and administrative excellence that the single greatest challenge to district coherence involves the provision of quality professional learning at scale (Elmore, 2004; Hubbard, Mehan & Stein, 2006; Penuel et al., 2011; Stosich, Bocala & Forman, 2018). Nonetheless for Dr. Jackson it was sobering to confront the sheer extent of knowledge and expertise deficits at all district levels across a range of everyday practice and policy domains, bearing directly on whether district leaders could competently execute their roles. As she observed, roughly six months after becoming CEO, "There is

<sup>65</sup> See: <https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/District.aspx?districtId=15016299025>.

inadequate training of staff throughout the organization. To be fair to people, we haven't done a good job training but there are people who just don't know. A lot of departments are cut to the bone. But I also think that's not a good enough reason. There are some things where we need to train people right away.” In a real sense, grappling with the district’s pervasive adult learning challenges involved engaging a secondary adult instructional core every bit as complex as improving quality of instruction in classrooms. Applications of technologies like those in development of CEI promised to open delivery mechanisms more effective than traditional “train the trainer” models. But the problem of improving the design and delivery of professional learning to accelerate district improvement loomed as the single most pressing challenge facing Dr. Jackson’s team.

***Charter School Autonomy and Challenges to Instructional Coherence.*** Earlier we argued that Dr. Jackson’s hybrid ideological profile have equipped her to play the role of boundary spanner at this particular historical moment for CPS. At the same time, features of CPS’ particular portfolio structure clearly pose challenges to coherence making as well as the advancement of equity. For example, among Dr. Jackson’s first policy initiatives as CEEdO was a set of steps to include charter schools within the annual School Quality Reporting Policy (or SQR), thus assuring greater comparability in accountability structures between charter and other district schools.<sup>66</sup> In numerous respects, however, CPS’ over 120 charter elementary and high schools, serving over 8,000 students, remain “. . . free to set their own budgets; hire and fire teachers directly; and determine grade promotion and graduation requirements. They can also establish their own student discipline code, set their own academic calendar, and determine their admissions process, as long as they comply with state law governing each of these areas” (Gwynne & Moore, 2017, p. 7). Moreover, CPS charter schools and their management organizations are not integrated into the CPS Network structures in ways comparable to schools managed by the district. Thus Chicago charter schools stand apart from the structures that the CEO team currently is designing to align the strategic planning and school improvement processes of central office, network, and school staffs. Further, while a 2017 CCSR study found some achievement advantages for Chicago charter high schools when compared to CPS non-charters serving similar students, it also found substantial variation in quality and performance within the Chicago charter high school sector. Given substantial progress among district-run high schools around metrics like Freshman-on-track, the study recommended greater collaboration between the two sectors. But currently there are serious structural limitations to supporting such collaboration (Gwynne & Moore, 2017).

**RQ4. How and how well did central office improvement strategies align to a vision, strategies, and toolsets for continuous improvement at the Network and school levels? How far did alignment progress, and what challenges to such alignment emerged?**

Of the spectrum of structural challenges encountered by Dr. Jackson and her team during the study period, arguably the most complex and vexing has involved configuring network offices to support and catalyze school improvement processes. As we have noted, this problem has been persistent over the roughly two decades that CPS has maintained a middle level of school supervision. And it remains ubiquitous across the country, as large urban districts continue to struggle with how to organize their middle levels of school management so as to elevate support for principal instructional leadership and development of the instructional core (Burch & Spillane, 2004; O’Day, Bitter & Gomez, 2011; Goldring et al., 2018).

In the case of CPS, these efforts have included considerable attention to aligning the infrastructures supporting strategic planning and data transmission across the district’s three levels through the

<sup>66</sup> The change in policy in October 2015 tied charter renewal applications more closely to the same SQR performance metrics that determined whether regular district schools would be placed on the “Academic Warning List” and subject to increased scrutiny in the subsequent academic year. See: <https://policy.cps.edu/download.aspx?ID=273>.

development of new CI-focused staff positions and professional learning around strategic planning. Other promising alignment initiatives have included elevating selectivity in the hiring of Network Chiefs; integrating Network Chiefs and deputies into central office leadership events; moving the management of the CIWP into the Office of Network Supports; creating four dedicated high school networks aligned to the district's high school strategy to experiment with a "resource hub" approach to resource differentiation by school; aligning the work of ONS and the Office of Teaching & Learning around the Resource Hub model; and actively pursuing a next generation "unified platform" for CI strategic planning across all district levels. Yet beyond the technical level, substantive alignment has proven elusive, as Dr. Jackson admitted in 2019: "What I wanted, that we have not been able to achieve, is ideally, I would love it if school level goals somehow rolled up to network level goals and somehow connected to department goals." Her continued resolve to achieve that is reflected in the fact that at key junctures she has engaged directly with ONS and Network Chiefs to re-energize priority work that was not moving in the direction and at the pace she desired and envisioned.

In many respects the challenges entailed in enhancing alignment between schools, network offices, and central office departments are classic problems of "loose coupling" endemic to large scale, multi-leveled systems. If one rationale for maintaining a middle level of school supervision is to abet differentiation of services to schools with varied needs, then Network Offices require latitude to vary what services are delivered and how. Yet this also implies increased learning demands on Chiefs, ISLs, and other Network Staff in terms of growing expertise and developing service deployment options. These learning demands will remain one factor driving variations in Network Chief performance into the near future. At the same time, our case data suggest other factors driving persistent variability in network office performance that may be amenable to improvement and clarification efforts. Here we briefly outline two such challenges.

First, a general principle underlying CPS strategic planning is that a clear and shared theory of action at the unit level will play an important role in focusing and guiding implementation steps toward priority goals. Yet it is unclear from our case evidence whether the 17 current Network Chiefs and their staffs share a sufficiently powerful and specified *theory of practice* around the ways that Network Offices support schools or mediate the flow of support between schools and central office departments. To be sure, ONS strategic plans require staff to specify theories of action around how implementation steps will build specific network office capacities linked to ONS priority goals. Likewise, each network office's strategic plan specifies theories of action for its priority goals, as well as clear linkages to relevant KPIs. But our review of professional learning presentations and other ONS materials did not surface any broader, shared conceptual frames for network practice that might deepen the understandings of Network Chiefs around their core roles, and provide a basis for organizing inquiry within the Chief cadre into their most pressing problems of collective practice. Better equipping the Chief cadre to test and improve a collective framework for practice around core problems of leadership development and supervision would appear to be one avenue of capacity worth concerted development by ONS.

Second, Network Chiefs and Instructional Support Leaders (ISLs) as a cadre are expected to elevate principal instructional leadership and support teacher instructional improvement at scale across the district. This expectation depends upon the accessibility and clarity of a common framework for instructional excellence that NC's and ISLs understand deeply and can share readily with principals and teachers, as well as discuss as an improvement cadre on a regular basis (Cobb & Jackson, 2011; Cosner, Leslie & Shyja, 2019). However, our interview and artifact reviews suggest that while instructional guidance consistent with Common Core State Standards is embedded in many documents current in the district – for example, the 2013 Framework for Teaching, embedded in the REACH evaluation criteria, the 2017 School Excellence Framework, and the TRU framework employed by the Office of Teaching and Learning – CPS currently has not deployed a definitive and detailed framework for understanding the desired student learning experiences that guide classroom instruction at a district-wide level.

In turn, absence of such authoritative guidance was viewed by several central office leaders as an impediment to the district's ability to translate instructional and leadership coaching from network staff into reliable improvements in classroom instruction. As one senior district officer noted, "...because the district has not strongly defined what quality instruction can and should be on a daily experience for a student and held itself accountable for measuring that daily experience for the student, then we've left the door wide open for actors at the very local level who are held accountable in a very real way to feel like anything goes, in terms of daily instruction." Dr. Jackson, reflecting on the gaps her team observed while on the high school instructional walks with Network Chiefs, observed similarly, "We remember some of the classrooms we went in where there was no instructional coherence. But also in those teachers' defense, the district hasn't given them anything. There are no expectations. We couldn't go in there and say, it's January, you should be doing this because we haven't provided that. We just know what we think that is."

While the middle level of school supervision and its alignment to efforts to craft coherence remain challenging from the perspective of district leaders, other data suggest that CPS Networks are improving in their capacity to meet principal's professional learning needs. The 2019 edition of the Chicago Public Education Fund's CPS principal survey asked "...if the support and feedback they receive from their immediate manager is key to improving their performance."<sup>67</sup> About 73% of regular district school leaders agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, and only 8% disagreed. While roughly 58% of regular district principals expressed frustrations with the press of compliance requirements from the district – typically, communicated through the Network – only 16% of principals complained about levels of "responsiveness and support from my CPS Network." From the perspective of enacting reciprocal accountability, this suggests that most CPS Network Chiefs and their staffs have progressed in their engagement with the professional learning needs of principals, even as pressure on NC's to "move the needle" on student achievement outcomes, as reflected in their annual strategic plans, remains high.

**RQ5. Over time, what were the most prominent successes and impacts of the CEO's institutional revitalization program on the culture and capacity of the district? Did these advances translate to measurable gains in key metrics of professional capacity and student success?**

While this program of capacity building was inevitably an ambitious work in progress, our body of evidence (comprising interviews, artifacts, and event observations) points to a least six enhancements of district capacity by winter 2020:

First, our interviews testified to an observable shift in the professional culture and climate of the district, and particularly at the central office level. In contrast to the palpable demoralization following budget and staffing cuts through early 2016, many central office staffers in 2019 and early 2020 described their work environment and professional interactions in terms of relational trust, reciprocal accountability, personal and collective efficacy, and internal attribution for performance. The central office staff we interviewed identified with both the abilities and the commitment of their colleagues, supported the principles and goals of the first and second vision statements, and reported a renewed sense of pride in the district's senior leadership and its legitimacy in the eyes of district stakeholders.

This is not to say that Dr. Jackson's agenda to socialize and align all central office offices and departments into rigorous, disciplined cycles of continuous improvement was received without implementation challenges, conflict, or dissent. Both our meeting observations and document analyses revealed variation in the quality of execution of strategic planning and CI leadership practices, for example, around competence in the use of root cause analyses or the development of coherent theories of

<sup>67</sup> To see survey results:

<https://public.tableau.com/profile/rashida.kimbrue#!/vizhome/2019EngagementSurveyv2/2019PrincipalEngagementSurvey>.

action. A significant number of chiefs and department directors voiced frustration with the complexity and technical clumsiness of some strategic planning tools. And there was concern among senior district leaders about the time and capacity demands of CI-related planning and related meetings in a continued context of lean department staffing and resources. Discussion of these issues by interviewees, however, tended to be couched within a deepening professional commitment to solving problems of CI practice and making those practices more sustainable. Something of this commitment as well as frustration around ongoing problems of practice comes through in the reflections of one senior department staffer about the challenge of aligning the priorities of multiple departments in a very results-driven culture:

*I think there is a lot of autonomy in different departments and I think that that's a positive because a lot of educators I think are very innovative and you know, are kind of Type-A go getters. But when I look at the work...to bring all these different departments in line, I think there's going to be some pushback. I don't think we've really figured out a great way to collaborate across even content teams.... I think philosophically we're really aligned, but the day to day work, I think we're lacking some systems. And so even though it's a very positive place, I do think that there's some level of frustration with things not being as strategic and planned as they could be.*

Second, the evidence points to a robust re-launch of performance management structures and routines together with a successful pivot toward norms and analytic routines characteristic of a continuous improvement ethos and mindset. By fall 2018, all central office departments, network offices, and over 600 schools were enacting continuous improvement routines with a core of common practices, creating at least the potential for more powerful alignment and communication between the three system levels. And a new generation of cross-functional leadership roles was created to foster closer articulation between central office and network-level strategic planning. While compliance anxieties and mindsets were not fully displaced, department-level strategic review sessions (beginning-, middle- and end-of-year) were increasingly conducted as collegial discussions of shared problems of practice around goal attainment, using tools enacting root cause and gap analysis. Further, norms and expectations linked to convergence across central office units were beginning to support improved cross-department communication and better strategic coordination when compared with prior CPS administrations. This seemed particularly apparent across the traditional macro-level divisions between operational and academic offices. As Chief Operating Officer Arnie Rivera reflected:

*I think the continuous improvement process has helped eliminate those silos, and more importantly, has helped a lot [to support] more cross-collaboration amongst the academic and the operation sides than has ever been there. And you know, it's one of these things where I feel from a central office perspective, our academic teams, our operations teams talk to one another significantly more than I've ever seen in the last 15 years.*

Third, the evidence indicates that the program of collective and job-embedded professional learning routines for central office leaders converged to sustain and improve the execution of CI routines at an ambitious pace, while also building the capacity of senior leaders to collaborate around decision-making and organize to respond adaptively to emerging crises. The organization of collective learning in the Cabinet setting facilitated the establishing of a professional learning community with clear norms of accountability for applying learning to unit operations. And the one-to-one cycles of reporting and feedback between central office chiefs and CEO/CEO supported a differentiated approach to chiefs' leadership growth. By winter 2020, consistent implementation of these learning and reporting cycles in a regular sequence and cadence, along with intentional hiring of new senior staff with continuous improvement experience, were yielding a senior leadership cadre sharing a core language and stronger common understanding of the district's CI ethos and methodology. This created a foundation for accelerating the improvement of unit-level CI structures, while enabling efforts to deploy CI approaches to more ambitious cross-functional leadership of structures such as Vision Collaboratives.



Fourth, while budget restrictions slowed initial progress in the CEEdO period, the district gradually built a technical and data-system infrastructure to address the need for timely and accurate data within CI strategic plans as well as the monitoring of vision goals, and the creation of the envisioned linkages between CI plans across the three system levels. In addition to meeting the full range of standard functions of an IT office in a massive, communications- and data-rich organization, the Office of Information and Technology Services (ITS)<sup>68</sup> established an “Enterprise Transformation Office” to anticipate the IT requirements of ambitious next generation projects such as the Curriculum Equity Initiative and the forthcoming partnership with City Colleges of Chicago, the “Chicago Roadmap.” The Office of ITS will be a central partner with ONS and the CEO Office in mounting a new unified platform for CI plans and data sources across the district’s three levels, allowing the schools’ priority service needs as expressed in their CIWP’s to be communicated quickly and efficiently to network chiefs and central office departments.

Fifth, building on methods of strategic continuous improvement, cross-functional collaboration, and technical infrastructure, the CPS central office demonstrated significant capacity to mount, execute, and sustain “enterprise-scale” initiatives to advance instructional coherence and secure equity objectives. While the Curriculum Equity Initiative (CEI) was the most expansive of these projects, other consequential initiatives included GoCPS (addressing equitable access to enrollment opportunities); Lead with CPS (expanding a leadership pipeline through support of a spectrum of leader development resources and experiences for teachers and administrators); and the Annual Regional Analysis or ARA (establishing a deep data portrait of 16 city regions tagged to CPS schools, facilitating a more equitable process of distributing CPS curricula and programs to city schools). These initiatives challenged central office staff to develop stronger project and change management competencies paired with high collective efficacy, along with deeper capacity to collaborate on the design of technical and iterative design systems. These skills built directly from 3-4 years of professional learning and job-embedded practice in the enactment of continuous improvement routines.

Sixth, the district also built capacity to integrate external partnerships into its strategies to advance strategic and instructional coherence. To be sure, this capacity capitalized on over three decades of collaboration with reform-oriented organizations in Chicago, and most notably with the UChicago Consortium, the Chicago Community Trust, and the Chicago Public Education Fund (CPEF), among others. But by aligning an organizational engagement strategy closely to its primary vision goals, and investing in partnership management structures within the Children First Fund and the Department of School Quality, Measurement & Research (SQMR), the district imposed heightened discipline on the selection and engagement of funders and other partners. The district used the same organizational structures to assure funders and corporate partners of greater CPS accountability and transparency around the accomplishment of projected outcomes. In addition, the district evidenced growing levels of *absorptive capacity* in its transactions with external experts, building collaborative structures and routines to exchange information and sustain joint inquiry into shared problems of practice. Heightened absorptive capacity in projects like CEI was rooted in habits of job-embedded professional learning maturing within CPS’ continuous improvement cycles (see pp. 62-63 for discussion).

Finally, while this case study could not investigate causal links between Dr. Jackson’s aligned strategies for district transformation and progress on the district’s vision goals, there was early evidence that CPS was advancing on several metrics at a pace sufficient to meet those goals over five years. In a September 2020 progress report on the five-year vision goals, CPS distinguishes three progress rates: percentages on-track to achieve the goal; percentages improving but not on pace to meet the goal; and percentages “losing ground on their goal” (i.e. not improving) (see [Exhibit 40](#)). Four metrics indicated one-year rates of change on-track to meet the district’s ambitious goals: four- and five-year high school graduation rates;

<sup>68</sup> See: <https://www.cps.edu/about/departments/information-and-technology-services/>.

percentage of CPS graduates with passing grades on AP exams; and the percentage of CPS elementary students meeting or exceeding the mean national percentile one-year growth ranking (grades 2-8) on the NWEA reading assessment. Three other metrics were improving but not at a rate sufficient to hit the five year target.<sup>69</sup> And eight metrics presented largely flat rates of growth from SY 2018 to SY 2019, and thus were deemed “losing ground on their goal.”<sup>70</sup> Perhaps as important, the progress report makes good on a pledge by the district to transparency and clarity in updating the public on its success in meeting priority goals, including breakouts by gender and racial sub-group.

#### **RQ6. What leadership lessons did the CEO draw from her efforts to shift institutional culture and capacity toward continuous improvement practices?**

Throughout this case study we have highlighted recurring themes both in Dr. Jackson’s leadership practices and in the developing leadership capability of senior district leaders that helped extend and connect continuous improvement structures and mindsets to all system levels by winter 2020. Not surprisingly, and given her learner’s stance toward the work of district transformation, we also witnessed evolution in some of Dr. Jackson’s understandings of system-level leadership and its challenges, especially as she transitioned from the challenging but still somewhat bounded portfolio of the CEEdO to the full sweep of responsibility vested in the CEO role. Here we consider two of the working insights into the nature and exercise of district leadership that emerged from our interviews with Dr. Jackson.

One fundamental insight that Dr. Jackson drew from her transition to CEO involved the underlying unity between what might seem like two very different leadership challenges – those of change or innovation management, on the one hand, and crisis management, on the other. As she put it, referencing a particularly threatening situation in 2018, “I do think that from a leadership standpoint, it’s not just about the innovation side. It is about the management side too. And the same principles that I believe are important when you’re launching a new initiative - I used those principles when we were responding to this issue.”

What were these principles? Recall that upon entering the CEO role, Dr. Jackson quickly identified a tension between advancing her strategic priorities and securing her agenda and the district from a daunting range of tactical risks, both “known-knowns” and “known-unknowns.” This tension was both organizational and personal. If she was to buffer the organization from potentially derailing eruptions she would need to identify and mitigate the risks expeditiously. And if she was to maintain energy for advancing strategic aims, then she had to minimize the inevitable time she had to spend in “fire-fighting” mode. Thus she quickly organized a disciplined, protocol-driven inquiry process to surface, categorize, and rank order a range of institutional threats, and develop a set of mitigation strategies to bring these dangers to heel. And in terms of adaptivity, she brought several features of her strategic innovation approach into the sphere of crisis management. She enacted a mindset of transparency, sense-making, and iterative learning for her immediate circle of senior advisors. She distributed and authorized responsibility for learning a process of threat anticipation and mitigation among those advisors, making them a more crisis-ready team. In 2019 this readiness was enhanced with further executive training in crisis management from the Northwestern University Kellogg School of Management. And she and her team created an information base from which to build credibility with key stakeholders, particularly the new

<sup>69</sup> These include: percentage of high school graduates earning at least one college and career credential; percentage of CPS elementary students meeting or exceeding the mean national percentile attainment ranking (grades 2-8) on the NWEA reading assessment; and percentage of CPS elementary students meeting or exceeding the mean national percentile attainment ranking (grade 2) on the NWEA math assessment.

<sup>70</sup> These include: NWEA attainment levels and growth rates in math (grades 2-8); NWEA attainment levels (Grade 2); Percentages of high school students deemed “college ready” on the SAT and PSAT; and rates of attendance, college enrollment, and 9<sup>th</sup> grade-on-track. See [Exhibit 40](#) for detailed descriptions of each five-year vision goal metric.

Board of Education, in line with her working principle of strategic transparency – that is, proactively informing the public about problems, paired with coherent proposals to fix them.

Similar principles of strategic and innovative response were brought to bear under conditions of actual crisis management. The earliest and arguably most dangerous of these came in May 2018, when an explosive investigation by the Chicago Tribune entitled “Betrayed” revealed a long and disturbing legacy of unaddressed sexual abuse allegations going back decades and implicating both district employees and students.<sup>71</sup> Again, what is most evident in her response is continuity with the principles and practices she had applied as CEdO and CEO to the cultivation of public support and internal capacity for innovation and continuous improvement.

- First, she quickly got ahead of public backlash by fully acknowledging the District’s failure to protect children, fast-tracking an internal investigation, and accepting responsibility for swiftly advancing solutions. Her credibility in doing so rested on her recent history of frequent, personal outreach and substantive response to parents and community members, and her authenticity as a CPS parent in her own right. As she noted, “I think that if you had a leader that people didn’t know and trust, that would’ve spiraled more than it did.”
- Second, and mobilizing her Communications team, she followed initial transparency with frequent public updates on the district’s responses to the crisis, including public appearances in two town hall formats. Updates included progress on roughly 50 public recommendations from the CPS Office of Inspector General (OIG) to address system failures and inadequacies.
- Third, she initiated *processes of data gathering* preliminary to framing solutions. She convened her own senior inquiry into the internal failures leading to chronic and largely undetected sexual abuse. This included a thorough scan of national reporting data to understand the ubiquity of sexual abuse in large urban districts, as well as a literature review of leadership lapses related to accountability failures. She and her team consulted as well with comparable K-12 districts, the Department of Education, and the Center for Disease Control for ideas and systems addressing the problem.
- Fourth, she *applied a coherence lens* to determine where misalignment and dis-connections among systems and practices yielded dis-service to students and families. A systems analysis revealed the lack of a *centralized information system* for tracking both adults and students implicated in sexual abuse allegations coming from schools. Thus the system was blind to patterns of allegations against adults, and could not monitor the academic progress of student victims in order to provide necessary supports. Within a year an integrated data system addressing harassment and abuse allegations was established and linked to other systems in the Law and Talent Offices to expedite tracking of all cases, allegations, and patterns of allegation among employees.
- Fifth, she and her team *re-designed policies and structures* to coordinate the district’s response to matters of student safety, harassment, and abuse. A new Office of Student Protections and Title IX was established to redirect and channel relevant information toward students charged with the expedited investigation of sexual abuse and harassment cases as well as the support of students implicated as victims in these cases.<sup>72</sup> At the same time the Office of the Inspector General was tasked with investigating and expediting action around cases involving sexual misconduct by CPS-affiliated adults.<sup>73</sup>

Finally, while these steps were recognized by an independent evaluator as effective structural responses,<sup>74</sup> the CEO and her team also saw longer-term, strategic benefits and opportunities in the crisis. Dr. Jackson

<sup>71</sup> For overview of this investigation, see: <https://graphics.chicagotribune.com/chicago-public-schools-sexual-abuse/index.html>.

<sup>72</sup> For overview of this office, see: <https://www.cps.edu/about/departments/office-of-student-protections-and-title-ix/>.

<sup>73</sup> For a more comprehensive overview of CPS responses to this crisis, see: <https://www.cps.edu/about/protecting-chicagos-students/>.

<sup>74</sup> A follow-up report on CPS responses to the sexual abuse crisis led with this conclusion: “In the year since we issued our Preliminary Report, CPS has vastly improved its overall infrastructure for addressing sexual misconduct. CPS implemented many

challenged her staff to approach the crisis as an opportunity to position CPS as a national leader in devising systems and structures to track and monitor what was in fact a national sexual harassment crisis.<sup>75</sup> Further, she approached the evidence of pervasive student-to-student sexual harassment through an educator's lens, seeing an opportunity to significantly shift student and adult awareness of these issues at a moment of wider cultural awakening to such problems. Thus the new Office was also charged with developing a comprehensive training regime for students and adults around harassment, abuse, and safety issues. Summarizing her integration of the tactical, strategic, and moral facets of the crisis, she observed:

*We have to address the issue. We've got to get CPS out of the newspaper. I have to make parents trust the district. But I also see this bigger thing. We also have the opportunity to change the culture of CPS so that if you are a perpetrator you will be afraid to come here because our systems are going to catch you. If you are a kid and you grow up in the CPS system, you're going to learn and be held to a higher standard of interaction than if you were in a different district. We're not there yet, but that's the work that we're doing and the policies we put in place.*

A second issue around which Dr. Jackson's thinking evolved during the study was the observation in herself and others that, as Marshall Goldsmith (2010) puts it, "What got you here won't get you there." That is, success and effectiveness at one level of leadership in an organization is no guarantee of success at higher levels of responsibility and authority. In Dr. Jackson's experience as a leader and a developer of leaders, this phenomenon arises both from individual leader's limitations as they transact with the demands of new positions, as well as from limitations in CPS organizational culture. And it can be exacerbated by promotion policies that move promising leaders too quickly into executive positions without suitable training and supports. Regarding individual limitations, Dr. Jackson was aware in her own case that a strong capacity for pattern finding and systems thinking had supported her practice of adaptive leadership at every stage of her career. But the sheer scope of the CEO position and the district as system had begun to outstrip even her knack for sense-making in sprawling, complex problem spaces.

As she reflected: "I have always naturally looked for patterns. When I was a teacher, I would look for patterns across the school, trying to understand what's going on. And when I became a principal I did the same. So at every layer of leadership in my professional career, I've always tried to look for those patterns. It has been very difficult to find those patterns at this level because there's so many things happening. And then you bring in the human part – 'I just want to do my work, I know what I need to do, I'm concerned about my box.' I feel like that's the biggest hurdle to finding the patterns." Her greatest asset in addressing this challenge was her strong learner's stance, which as we've seen, allowed her to access the district's deep expertise, and build a senior team with a proclivity for pattern finding similar to her own. As she put it, "...having a team of people who actually think like that is critically important. Like I don't want people who are just stagnant and like lining up bowling pins and knocking them down. I did my job and I'm leaving. Like if you knocked them down, how do we do it better the next time?"

The same discontinuities in individual readiness for the next steps in leadership were evident to Dr. Jackson as a leadership supervisor. For example, the dominant assumption built into the selection of Network Chiefs (NCs) – that success as a principal was the sine qua non for success as a principal supervisor – routinely fell short in NC's actual performance. Closer analysis revealed an entire skill set around coaching and developmental feedback that successful principals in an accountability-driven system did not necessarily develop, but which was essential to building capacity in a network of principals. As she observed, "...all of these people are high performing principals in their own right...but

of the recommendations from our Preliminary Report and made significant progress toward protecting its students from sexual misconduct." See: <https://www.cps.edu/globalassets/cps-pages/about/protecting-chicagos-students/preventing-and-responding-to-sexual-misconduct-follow-up-report.pdf>.

<sup>75</sup> For overview of the national context for this crisis, see the New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/11/us/politics/sexual-assault-school.html>.

just because you lead a good school doesn't mean you're ready to lead adults.” This faulty assumption thus led to high rates of turnover in the NC position annually, weakening the capacity of networks as a support for school improvement. In turn, Dr. Jackson engaged several academic chiefs intensively around a wide range of dispositional and mindset issues that undermined their capacity to build team cohesion, advance CI practice, and engage external constituencies effectively. These individuals had risen high in an organization that was increasingly selective and competitive in its hiring practices. But it remained an organization without deep systems for identifying and developing leadership talent based on a well-articulated framework and principles, particularly above the level of school leadership practice.

As our case presents, and to fill this gap, Dr. Jackson and her team evolved a continuum of leadership development opportunities and settings with at least three related aims; first, to build a community of leadership practice focused on the specific demands of continuous organizational improvement (e.g. the Executive Cabinet); second, to provide nimble and tailored feedback to individual managers around specific problems of unit leadership and team-based practice (e.g. the bi-weekly feedback meetings); and third, to provide advanced leadership preparation experiences gauged to the next steps in responsibility and authority – that is, to deepening the leadership bench (e.g. the Northwestern University executive learning sessions). This third category of experiences included participation in internal committees and advisory boards in which members were encouraged to approach their activities as active learning experiences in addition to service opportunities and professional recognition. Other experiences were designed and delivered in partnership with expert external collaborators such as the Harvard Public Education Leadership Project, the Chicago Public Education Fund, and Northwestern University Graduate School of Management. These “out-of-the-action” leadership engagements complemented the daily participation of CPS leaders in job-embedded professional learning activities with carefully scaffolded reflective experiences in the company of diverse colleagues from other backgrounds and school systems. Without access to such experiences in her own training Dr. Jackson doubted whether her school leadership experiences alone would have equipped her to step up to executive level system responsibility in CPS.<sup>76</sup>

## Conclusion

This case study presents evidence that between July 2015 and December 2019 Dr. Janice Jackson led an effective program of organizational development aimed at building the capacity of the Chicago Public Schools to more powerfully align the district’s resources toward greater instructional coherence and the closing of chronic achievement gaps. In doing so she and her team made significant headway on a common problem of practice facing large urban school districts, namely, the reconfiguration and re-culturing of central office work-ways to more potently address at scale the diverse improvement needs of city schools. She and her colleagues accomplished this by:

- articulating a vision for district revitalization that frankly addressed past shortcomings and inequities;
- reframing traditional power relations in terms of customer service and accountability for student success;
- developing a methodological spine for driving that vision based on concepts, norms, structures, routines, and tools geared to practices of professional learning and continuous improvement;
- building shared leadership capacity necessary to re-organize district units around new routines for learning and continuous improvement;

<sup>76</sup> As she noted, “I was a principal for over 11 years, but it was my 10th year before I received executive training. And had I not gotten that training, I would not have been prepared for the roles that occurred after that. So I think we have to set up better systems. So I say all that to say in addition to us picking the right person, it has since led to strengthening our work with the Chicago Public Education Fund. Because when we think about principal retention and career ladders..., we have an opportunity to change the conversation and make it more than just going from job to job. There are stages of development that you can do within role.”

- partnering with senior colleagues in adaptive engagement with the district’s inevitable, emergent challenges, and;
- intentionally representing and modeling the leadership values and practices she espoused in her public and professional leader persona.

Through these and related strategies, Dr. Jackson and her team progressed in disrupting traditional mindsets based in fear, compliance, and siloed practice in favor of a more adaptive and optimistic professional culture based in reciprocal accountability, collective efficacy, cross-functional collaboration, and continuous learning for improvement. These shifts in climate and culture were evident at all three district levels as well as in the quality and focus of public engagement. And they helped to drive continued progress on key measures of student success, most notably in high school graduation rates and post-secondary persistence levels. But they were particularly evident at the central office level, where concerted attention to crafting more coherent improvement practices, anchored in moral purpose and disciplined routines of inquiry, deepened personal identification with the district’s goals and greater confidence in senior leadership across operations and academic departments. In subtle but potent ways, these shifts in daily practices of leading and learning have altered the subjective experience of working in central office for a critical mass of staff, even as the pace and push of enacting more ambitious goals has become more pressing. Thus we conclude that in key respects Chicago Public Schools in 2020 is a more fully realized learning organization than the district that Dr. Jackson first took on as Chief Education Officer in 2015. This is fortunate given the stiff tests that challenges like Covid-19 and its aftermath, systemic inequity rooted in class and racial disparities, and ubiquitous fiscal and political turbulence will pose for CPS into the foreseeable future. The question now facing CPS and its leadership is how to leverage this nascent learning capacity to discern and grapple with the next steps in development around coherence and equity that bear upon its ambitious assertion that, indeed, for Chicago’s children, “Success Starts Here.”

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