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# Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement – Executive Summary



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*April 2010*



**Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy**  
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# The Study of Leadership for Learning Improvement

With support from The Wallace Foundation, a team of researchers from the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy at the University of Washington has undertaken an investigation of leadership in urban schools and districts that are seeking to improve both learning and leadership. The study explored the following overarching question: *What does it take for leaders to promote and support powerful, equitable learning in a school and in the district and state system that serves the school?* The study pursued this question through a set of coordinated investigations, each with an intensive qualitative or mixed-methods strategy and with overlapping samples, designed to offer images of what is possible in schools and districts that take learning improvement seriously. Study sites were chosen to reflect a focus on learning and leadership improvement and varying degrees of progress toward improvement goals.

- **School Leadership investigation:** The reconfiguration and exercise of leadership within elementary, middle, and high schools to enable more focused support for learning improvement
- **Resource Investment investigation:** The investment of staffing and other resources at multiple levels of the system, in alignment with learning improvement goals, to enhance equity and leadership capacity
- **Central Office Transformation investigation:** The reinvention of central office work practices and relationships with the schools to better support districtwide improvement of teaching and learning

Separate reports detail the findings of each investigation, and a synthesis report identifies themes connecting the three study strands.

## ***Learning-focused Leadership and Leadership Support: Meanings and Practice in Urban Systems***

By Michael S. Knapp, Michael A. Copland, Meredith I. Honig, Margaret L. Plecki, and Bradley S. Portin

## ***Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools***

By Bradley S. Portin, Michael S. Knapp, Scott Dareff, Sue Feldman, Felice A. Russell, Catherine Samuelson, and Theresa Ling Yeh, with the assistance of Chrysan Gallucci and Judy Swanson

## ***How Leaders Invest Staffing Resources for Learning Improvement***

By Margaret L. Plecki, Michael S. Knapp, Tino Castañeda, Tom Halverson, Robin LaSota, and Chad Lochmiller

## ***Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement***

By Meredith I. Honig, Michael A. Copland, Lydia Rainey, Juli Anna Lorton, and Morena Newton, with the assistance of Elizabeth Matson, Liza Pappas, and Bethany Rogers

This document and the others within the series can be downloaded free of charge from the Center's Web site, [www.ctpweb.org](http://www.ctpweb.org), and also from The Wallace Foundation's Knowledge Center site, [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).

## Executive Summary

This report summarizes main results from a national study of how leaders in urban school district central offices fundamentally transformed their work and relationships with schools to support districtwide teaching and learning improvement. All three study districts had been posting gains in student achievement and credited their progress, in part, to efforts to radically change their work at the central office level. We aimed to understand more specifically what these central offices were doing. The study breaks new ground in educational research by uncovering the daily work practices and activities of central office administrators as they sought not just to make the central office more efficient but also to transform the central office into a support system to help all schools improve the quality of teaching and learning.

Our findings reveal that leaders in these systems, first and foremost, understood what decades of experience and research have shown: that districts generally do not see districtwide improvements in teaching and learning without substantial engagement by their central offices in helping all schools build their capacity for improvement. Central offices and the people who work in them are not simply part of the background noise in school improvement. Rather, school district central office administrators exercise essential leadership, in partnership with school leaders, to build capacity throughout public educational systems for teaching and learning improvements.

The districts in this study were attempting to heed those lessons by engaging in an approach to central office change we call “central office transformation.” Central office transformation is a far cry from central-office-administration-as-usual. This approach to reform:

- *Focuses centrally and meaningfully on teaching and learning improvement.* Other central office reforms aim to increase the efficiency with which the central office provides basic services to schools. Many central office leaders say that they work in service of teaching and learning. In transforming central offices, by contrast, staff are able to demonstrate how their work matters in concrete terms to teaching and learning improvement. What is more, they act, not just talk about it, and actually change their work to leverage specific supports for teaching and learning improvement.

- *Engages the entire central office in reform.* Some central office change strategies demand that certain departments, such as those focused on curriculum and instruction, work with schools in new ways. By contrast, central office transformation involves remaking how all central office administrators work with schools and with each other—everyone from the entire central office, no matter what department, unit, or function, participates in the transformation.
- *Calls on central office administrators to fundamentally remake their work practices and their relationships with schools to support teaching and learning improvements for all schools.* School district central offices routinely attempt to reform themselves by restructuring formal reporting relationships within central office hierarchies, adding or removing units, or revising their standard operating procedures. While structural changes can be helpful, a transformation strategy is fundamentally about remaking what the people in central offices do—their daily work and relationships with schools.
- *Constitutes an important focus for reform in its own right.* Some districts aim to remake central office work practices and relationships with schools in service of implementing a particular program or initiative. For example, as part of new small autonomous schools initiatives in some districts, central office administrators aimed to change the relationship between the central office and schools participating in that specific reform effort (Honig, 2009a). Portfolio management reforms seem headed in a similar direction (Honig & Dearmond, forthcoming). By contrast, districts engaged in central office transformation are working to change their central offices regardless of the particular programs or initiatives in which they may be participating at a given time. Central office transformation involves ongoing work on central office practice that supports teaching and learning improvement and that transcends particular programs or initiatives.

Central office transformation, then, is hardly a rehash of old efforts at “restructuring” the district organizational chart. Nor is it a top-down or a bottom-up approach to change. Rather, central office transformation goes right to the heart of practice—what people in central offices actually do day in and day out—to help improve teaching and learning for all students.

## The Five Dimensions of Central Office Transformation

Unlike some other district central office studies that make broad generalizations about how “the district” participates in school improvement, this study looked inside central offices to understand more specifically what central office administrators were doing as part of their transformation process. We found that their work involves the following five dimensions.

### The Five Dimensions of Central Office Transformation

*Dimension 1:* Learning-focused partnerships with school principals to deepen principals’ instructional leadership practice.

*Dimension 2:* Assistance to the central office–principal partnerships.

*Dimension 3:* Reorganizing and reculturing of each central office unit, to support the central office–principal partnerships and teaching and learning improvement.

*Dimension 4:* Stewardship of the overall central office transformation process.

*Dimension 5:* Use of evidence throughout the central office to support continual improvement of work practices and relationships with schools.

### Dimension 1: Learning-focused Partnerships with School Principals to Deepen Principals’ Instructional Leadership Practice

In all three systems, the heart of the transformation effort involved creating direct, personal relationships between individual central office administrators and school principals specifically focused on helping every school principal become a stronger instructional leader. To be sure, central office administrators interacted with schools in various other ways, including direct work with teachers. But a striking feature of all three central office transformation efforts was the focus on building the capacity of school principals to lead for instructional improvement within their schools. In the study districts, and in many districts across the country, growing attention to principals’ instructional leadership marks a promising shift in the role

of the school principal from mainly school building and staff manager to leadership for learning improvement. Some districts for years have routinely contracted out to external groups to provide supports for school principals in making these shifts. In the three transforming districts, however, responsibility for ongoing support for principals' instructional leadership became the main work of specific central office leaders, whom we call, collectively, Instructional Leadership Directors (ILDs). These staff were supposed to focus 100 percent of their time on helping school principals improve their practice.

We found that all of the ILDs worked with principals one-on-one and in networks of principals that they convened with the goal of improving principals' instructional leadership. However, some of the ILDs' practices within the one-on-one relationships and networks were more promising than others for supporting principals' instructional leadership. We distinguished promising ILDs' practices by their consistency with forms of assistance that decades of learning research have associated with helping to improve professionals' work. We corroborated those distinctions with our observations of changes in principals' instructional leadership, principals' reports of either their own improvement or the value of their work with their ILD, and reports and observations by other central office administrators and school support providers.

We found that when the ILDs' work with school principals seemed promising in the ways described above, these central office staff *differentiated supports for principals' instructional leadership consistently over the entire academic year*. By differentiation, we mean that the ILDs provided different supports to individual school principals based on their ongoing assessments of the principals' capacity for instructional leadership. Other ILDs, whose work we found less promising for strengthening principals' instructional leadership, provided inconsistent support to individual principals, with some of them having little to no contact with individual principals for any reason during certain times of the year.

Within the one-on-one relationships and networks, promising ILD practices also included: *modeling for principals how to think and act like an instructional leader; developing and using tools that supported principals' engagement in instructional leadership, and brokering external resources to help principals become more powerful instructional leaders*. In the principal networks, another promising practice included drawing on all principals in the network—not just some “high achieving” principals—as resources for each other in strengthening

instructional leadership practice; in so doing, the ILDs engaged principals in taking responsibility for their own development and that of their principal colleagues, rather than, for example, more traditional “sit-and-get” professional development.

## **Dimension 2: Direct Assistance to the Central Office–Principal Partnerships**

Leaders throughout the central office supported the work of the ILDs and the partnerships they formed with school leaders through the following intentional activities:

- *Providing professional development to the ILDs* that engaged them in ongoing challenging conversations about their work with principals and how to strengthen it.
- *Taking issues off the ILDs’ plates that interfered with efforts to focus their work with principals in instructional leadership.* For example, in one district, other central office administrators blocked off two and a half days each week when neither the ILDs nor school principals would be pulled into any meetings or other activities away from their learning-focused partnerships.
- *Others in the central office leading through, not over or around, the ILDs,* in ways that reinforced the centrality of the ILD-principal relationships and reinforced the importance of ILD leadership to the overall teaching and learning improvement effort.
- *The system, not solely the ILDs, holding principals accountable for improving schools’ performance on annual performance measures.* When the rest of the central office did not provide these supports, the ILDs found their time consumed by complying with evaluation activities rather than providing support to principals focused on instructional leadership.

## **Dimension 3: Reorganizing and Reculturing of Other Central Office Units to Support Teaching and Learning Improvement**

While the ILDs worked with principals on their instructional leadership practice and other central office administrators supported those partnerships, staff of the other central office units, to varying degrees, took steps to shift their own work to support teaching and learning improvement. *These shifts included taking case management and project management approaches to their work.*



On the surface, *case management* looked like the simple assignment of individual staff in Human Resources, Budget, Facilities, and other units to work with small groups of individual schools rather than handling certain processes like processing paperwork for new teachers for all schools. However, such structural changes did not automatically translate into those staff actually working with schools in smarter and better ways specifically connected to teaching and learning improvement. By contrast, when staff in our three districts worked in a case management fashion, they became experts in the specific needs, strengths, goals, and character of each individual school in their case load and worked to provide high-quality, responsive services appropriate to their individual schools. Central office administrators who took a case management approach focused their work on such questions as: Who are the individual principals in the schools I am responsible for? What are these school principals and their staff trying to do to improve teaching and learning? What kinds of resources do they need and how can I help them secure them?

When central office administrators took a *project-management approach* to their work, they shifted their focus from primarily delivering the services that they controlled to taking responsibility for solving problems that promised to help schools improve teaching and learning, even if those problems cut across multiple central office units. Through this approach, central office staff did not simply take on discrete tasks but rather engaged with their colleagues to solve specific problems around supporting schools' focus on teaching and learning improvement.

Reorganizing and reculturing the central office also involved *intentional efforts to develop the capacity of people throughout the central office to support teaching and learning improvement*. Such efforts included restaffing some central office units—removing staff and replacing them with people who had the capacity to engage in case management and project management. While some degree of restaffing was obviously necessary for central office transformation, it was hardly sufficient. Ongoing retraining of new and existing staff also proved essential. Additionally, the reorganization and reculturing efforts hinged substantially on *the creation and use of new ways to hold central office administrators accountable for high-quality performance*. Unlike performance management systems in some other districts, these accountability mechanisms focused centrally on linking the performance of central office administrators to teaching and learning outcomes. In the most developed example of all three of our sites, leaders in one system developed measures of their performance that helped them (1) gauge whether the



increased quality of their work freed up principals to focus on teaching and learning improvement; and (2) measure the cost savings associated with improvements in their performance, which translated into dollars they could reinvest into classrooms.

#### **Dimension 4: Stewardship of the Overall Central Office Transformation Process**

Stewardship—or leadership to support the overall transformation process—also seemed essential to the implementation of central office transformation. Stewardship means that central office administrators *engaged in continuously developing the “theory of action” underlying central office transformation, while communicating it and engaging others in understanding it.* In such presentations, leaders did not simply tell central office staff, school principals, and others what the central office transformation initiative involved; they took care to help others understand how specific activities in the central office transformation process promised to cause improvements in teaching and learning districtwide. These communications seemed to gain particular traction in actually increasing participants’ understandings when they involved dialog that provided others with the opportunity to grapple with, and thereby deepen, their understanding of what the central office transformation effort involved. Stewardship also featured *the strategic brokering of external resources and relationships to support the overall central office transformation efforts.* For example, leaders in these systems proactively convened and cultivated relationships with various outside funders to help them understand the work and encourage their support for it. Leaders also turned away offers of resources and outside assistance when those resources did not advance the strategic direction.

#### **Dimension 5: Use of Evidence throughout the Central Office to Support Continual Improvement of Work Practices and Relationships with Schools**

Each one of the first four dimensions depended on a fifth dimension of transformed central office practice: staff throughout the central office engaging in particular forms of evidence-based decision-making. To be sure, central office administrators throughout these systems were looking continuously at student performance data to help inform their decisions about their own work. However, more consequential to efforts to improve the quality of their own practice, *central*

*office administrators engaged in the ongoing collection of evidence from their own experience with the transformation process and attempted to use lessons from experience to inform how they engaged in the other four dimensions of central office transformation.* These findings mark a departure from some calls for evidence-based decision-making that ask district leaders to rely almost exclusively on standardized test results and various forms of scientifically-based research to ground their decisions. These three districts demonstrate how rapidly changing urban school systems, like innovating private firms, do well to create systems for regularly capturing their own experience with the work and considering how to use those lessons to inform their ongoing improvement efforts.

## What the Study Says about the Central Office and the Improvement of Teaching and Learning in School Districts

Overall, this study reveals that *central offices have vital roles to play in developing systems of support for districtwide teaching and learning improvement.* Some policy makers in recent years have questioned the importance of central offices and called for the outright outsourcing of central office functions to private management organizations, along with severely cutting investments in central office administration to channel resources to schools. This study suggests that such efforts sorely underestimate the importance of central office leadership to helping build school capacity for improvement, not just at a handful of schools but at schools throughout district systems. These efforts are not without their challenges, however. Through this report we provide some detail on the ups and downs of the work and particular pitfalls that the next wave of transforming central offices would do well to anticipate and avoid. Such challenges are hardly surprising given the non-traditional and outright counter-normative demands central office transformation places on administrators throughout central offices.

This study suggests that district leaders, policymakers, and others interested in districtwide teaching and learning improvement need to:

- *Move beyond old debates in education about whether schools or the central office should be driving reform and understand that improving teaching and learning districtwide is a systems problem*—a challenge that requires the participation of both central offices and schools in central leadership roles to realize such outcomes.

- *Understand the need for everyone in the central office to orient their work in meaningful ways toward supporting the development of schools' capacity for high quality teaching and expanding students' opportunities to learn.* This orientation toward teaching and learning throughout the central office moves far beyond rhetoric, to include real and meaningful changes in how people in central offices work, consistent with the five dimensions of practice the study findings revealed.
- *Understand that what fundamentally distinguishes this transformation strategy as a reform is its unrelenting focus on central office administrators' engagement in leadership practices that support improvements in teaching and learning in schools.* If the practice doesn't change, it isn't central office transformation.
- *Grasp how essential it is to build the capacity of people throughout district initiatives in the implementation of central office transformation.* Deep, sustainable changes in practice, furthermore, are not likely to occur spontaneously, or without concentrated attention to building capacity.
- *Understand the centrality of leaders taking a continuous improvement approach to their work in the process of central office transformation.* Given that these are new ways of working, the importance of people "learning their way into the work" as it unfolded cannot be overemphasized.

## Initiating Central Office Transformation as a Means for Improving Teaching and Learning

This report concludes with a brief set of recommendations intended to be helpful for central office leaders who want to engage in central office transformation.

**RECOMMENDATION 1.** *Engage in central office transformation as a focal point of a districtwide reform effort and as a necessary complement to other improvement initiatives.* District leaders should first understand that central office transformation is promising in its own right as an approach for improving teaching and learning districtwide and embrace it not as a replacement for other reforms, but alongside other efforts that may already be in place in their districts.

**RECOMMENDATION 2.** *Start the work of transformation by developing a theory of action for how central office practice in the particular local context contributes to improving teaching and learning, and plan to revise this theory as*

*the work unfolds.* However central office leaders choose to begin and develop such a reform approach in their own setting, they should start with a theory of action that ties their first and ongoing steps clearly and directly to teaching and learning improvement.

***RECOMMENDATION 3. Invest substantially in people to lead the work throughout the central office, and especially at the interface between the central office and schools.*** District leaders interested in central office transformation should not simply assume that their central offices are staffed with the right people for this work, nor that those staff who are already there are fully prepared to engage in new practices. Moving ahead with transformation efforts will likely require strategic hiring—which also may call for some strategic removal of certain central office staff and school principals—as well as sustained investment in supporting ongoing learning among those who work in all parts of the central office.

***RECOMMENDATION 4. Start now engaging key stakeholders, political supporters, and potential funders in understanding that central office transformation is important and requires sustained commitment.*** District leaders should consider what steps they will take to keep key stakeholders informed and supportive of these transformation efforts, and not just assume that people will understand why the focus on central office practice matters so much. Focusing on central office practice is not the norm in reform conversations. Accordingly, leaders will need to articulate their theory of action and reform plans in terms that are compelling and understandable to the full range of stakeholders and others and lay the basis for an ongoing “reform conversation.”



## Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy

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CTP—a national research consortium home-based at the University of Washington and including three other research partners (Stanford, University of Pennsylvania, and University of Michigan)—studies the way policies, leadership, and conditions in schools, districts, states, the federal government, and the education profession shape the quality of teaching and learning in the nation’s schools. The Center pays particular attention to the ways these forces and conditions interact with each other to influence what teachers, learners, and educational leaders do in daily practice.

A major goal of the Center’s program of research is to discover and document the means for improving practice so that the nation’s young people experience a challenging and equitable education. To that end, the Center’s research products are designed to inform policymakers, practicing leaders, and the educational reform community, along with scholars.



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