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It's about the kids: Refocusing central school district offices with teaching and learning in mind

By Peter Kelley

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When Bonneville, Idaho, school superintendent Charles Shackett instructed his finance director to become the district liaison for two schools and to visit both twice a week, it knocked the director from his comfort zone, to be sure -- but it had the desired effect.

"The transformation was phenomenal," Shackett said. "All of a sudden the schools became real to him -- the schools weren't just things, but they were people. They were kids."

It's not like the finance director hadn't been doing his job all along, faithfully tending budgets with an eye toward cost-effectiveness. But his focus wasn't on the schools or the district's educational goals for student achievement.

"I said, 'You say no to everything. You're just looking at numbers, you don't understand the impact on the classroom,'" Shackett said. "He didn't feel any responsibility to the instructional core; he felt responsibility to the School Board to be in the black."

When the finance director started visiting the schools where that money -- more than just numbers in budget columns -- was actually being used, "Suddenly it became real to him. It's amazing how much the principals started depending on the district office liaison," Shackett said. It turns out that the fellow's hobby was wood carving, and before long he was teaching a wood-carving class at the high school.

Shackett, who surprised his other central office administrators with similar outreach assignments, had recently undergone his own transformation after attending leadership workshops through the Idaho Superintendents Network put on by Mike Copland, based on research he conducted with Meredith Honig. Both are professors in the UW College of Education's Educational Leadership and Policy Studies division.

The workshops were based on Honig and Copland's recent research report, titled *Central Office Transformation for District-Wide Teaching and Learning Improvement*, which has been getting a lot of attention this year in the education world. The study was funded by the Wallace Foundation and published this spring by the College of Education's Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy.

In their research, briefly put, Honig and Copland looked for school districts that were successfully refocusing their central office staff on improving teaching and learning -- "folks who had taken seriously the idea of working differently as a central office," Copland said. They chose school systems in Atlanta, Ga.; Oakland, Calif.; and in New York City and studied how their central office staff supported principals and student achievement, and how those practices might be duplicated elsewhere.

The findings, their executive summary states, showed that these districts "understood what decades of experience 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."

Shackett called the refocusing process an "eye-opening experience," and said he returned to his job determined anew

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Mike Copland and Meredith Honig

Mary Levin

to reform his own district's central office. He credited Honig and Copland's research, plus a district improvement strategy devised at Harvard, with inspiring this will to change.

Of course, engaging central office staff with teaching and learning involves much more than just friendly visits and wood-carving classes. The study's recommendations call for experienced central office staff to work directly with principals as "instructional leadership directors" to help build the capacity of those principals to lead.

Honig said, "In our study we found that one of the changes that makes a significant difference is when a group of people in the central office take responsibility for helping school principals become excellent instructional leaders in their schools." She said many think of central office roles as largely regulatory -- "keeping people on task and regulating what they do." In their vision, "These aren't regulatory roles, they are partnership roles, where central office staff were working alongside principals trying to help principals exercise powerful leadership around instruction."

Modeling the right behavior for principals is central to the role of these central office-based instructional leaders, many of whom were talented teachers in their own classroom careers. "Being an excellent supporter of principals' instructional leadership is not a reform you just take off the shelf and implement -- it's a mode of leadership that's partly improvisational," Honig said. "Their roles are more like high-quality teaching ... a lot of what these instructional leadership directors do is very similar to what an excellent teacher does in a classroom of kids."

Honig saw this modeling in the districts she and Copland studied, presented by the instructional leaders in what the researchers call "challenging conversations." "They modeled it in a pretty sophisticated way ... they set it up as a lesson" and demonstrated the behavior, she said. For instance, an instructional leadership director might meet with teachers with the principal observing, then debrief the principal later: Did you see what I did and how the teachers responded? Did you feel it was effective? The two would later trade places, with the instructional leader observing.

"That kind of intensive work with a principal focused on instruction, focused on building principals' capacity to lead their school, is completely nontraditional work for a central office," Honig said.

"Some say that school district central offices are broken and should be eliminated. But I would argue that central offices generally do work very well in doing the things they were set up to do, which is regulate school compliance and handle basic business functions." But times have changed, she said, and districts are now faced with demands to improve learning outcomes for all students.

Honig added, "We're not claiming that these practices improve student achievement. We are claiming that these practices are promising for building schools' capacity to do that."

Honig and Copland have spent much time in recent months traveling the country discussing their research and its implications for school improvement. Honig has taken the lead in working with Susan Enfield, chief academic officer of the Seattle Public Schools, which resulted from an invitation from Superintendent Maria Goodloe-Johnson in 2008, Copland said.

The UW's own Center for Educational Leadership, a nonprofit center that works with schools, has proved a valuable practical laboratory for the research. Max Silverman, CEL director, said, "CEL's mission is to close the gaps that persist in schools ... and part of that vision is working with everybody from central office leaders to teachers." He had high praise indeed for Honig and Copland's research.

Silverman said central office reform has been one of the "Holy Grails" of education, with lots of talk over the years but little action. He added, "Very few could paint a picture of what it looks like, and Meredith and Mike have really painted that picture."

Shackett, the Idaho school superintendent, said his staff was reluctant at first -- "the only one who wanted to do it was me" -- but that they warmed to the process. Grading his own work as superintendent, he said "I went from a D to maybe a B, but there is so much more I have to keep pursuing. He stressed that continual follow-up will be needed for success, and that he must continue to "walk my talk" and model effective leadership behavior for others.

"I think sometimes as leaders we get up and make a speech and say this is what we're going to do, and then walk away from it and start on the next speech, thinking someone will do it, but no one's going to do it unless you are relentless."

Central Office Transformation for District-Wide Teaching and Learning Improvement is the third in a series of reports released by the UW Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy. You can learn more about the research and read the report at the center's [page](#).