



# Redesigning the “Central Office”

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A Framework for Districts**  
*Ellen Foley and David Sigler*

**Urban School District Central Offices  
and the Implementation of New Small  
Autonomous Schools Initiatives**  
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**Redesigning the Central Office  
to Deliver Better Value**  
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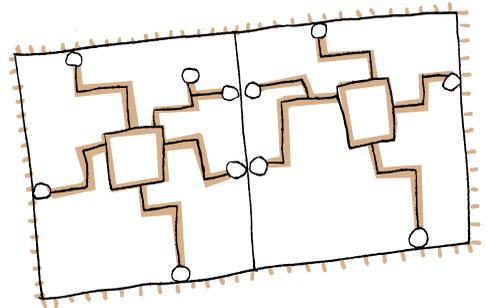
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# The New “Central Office”

Robert Rothman

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Over the past few years, educators and policy-makers have paid increasing attention to school districts. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform’s Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts, School Communities that Work, helped lead this effort by suggesting how districts could be redesigned to support schools in ways that promote results and equity. Other research has shown the critical role that districts play in school improvement.

This new attention is a welcome sign. For decades, school districts have been vilified as impediments to reform. This view was perhaps best exemplified by David Rogers’s 1968 book *100 Livingston Street*, which turned the headquarters of the New York City school system into a symbol of what he called a “sick bureaucracy.” Reformers in the 1980s and 1990s sought to bypass districts; standards-based reform was originally designed as a system in which schools would be accountable to states, and charter schools were created as a way for schools to be free from district rules altogether.

Yet, while researchers demonstrated the support that districts can – and need to – provide, their work raised the question of how districts can function effectively. What should a “smart district” look like? What would a modern-day 110 Livingston Street do?

This issue of *Voices in Urban Education* attempts to provide some answers to these questions. Using a variety of lenses and perspectives – those of researchers, consultants, reform-support organizations, and community leaders – the authors suggest what an

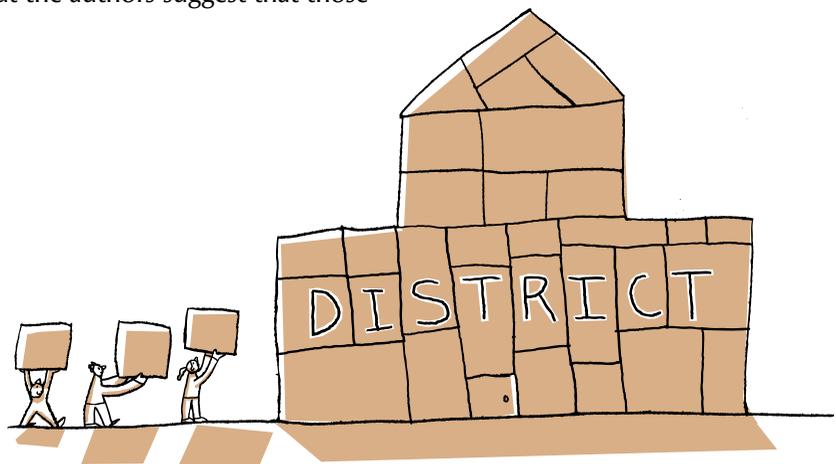
*Robert Rothman is senior editor at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and editor of Voices in Urban Education.*

effective “central office” would do and how these practices differ from those district central offices have typically performed.

- Ellen Foley and David Sigler lay out a framework for a smart district that focuses on six essential functions.
- Meredith Honig shows how central office staff in Chicago and Oakland worked to support an initiative to create small schools in those cities.
- Andrew Moffit draws lessons from the corporate sector to describe the three key areas a central office needs to address.
- Mary Sylvia Harrison discusses how a central office can and should engage parents and members of the community.

These authors make clear that the role of the central office ought to be far from that of the stereotypical bureaucratic agency. Effective central offices do not simply monitor whether schools comply with an endless set of rules; instead, they work with schools to provide needed resources and support and reach out to community members and organizations to find additional sources of support. They are nimble and flexible, rather than hidebound. And they make decisions by using data and research.

These articles also make clear that there are some things districts should *stop* doing. Of course, some functions, like transportation and legal services, will not go away. But the authors suggest that those



administrative functions need to be conducted in service to the district's mission, which is to ensure a high-quality education for every student. That suggests that redesigning central offices involves cultural change at least as much as it requires technical modifications to structures and roles and responsibilities.

Redesigning district central offices so that they function more effectively will not be an easy task. Change of that magnitude rarely is. People do not like the idea that the way they have worked for decades might have to change. But as these authors show, a redesigned district central office can be far more effective for children and families. Perhaps with the new attention on their role, central offices can have a chance to fulfill their potential.

# Getting Smarter: A Framework for Districts

Ellen Foley and David Sigler

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*A “smart district” focuses on six key functions in order to produce results and equity for all students.*

In 2002, School Communities that Work, the Annenberg Institute’s Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts, developed a set of ideas to create “smart districts” (Annenberg Institute 2002). Since then, a major part of the Annenberg Institute’s agenda has been to work with existing districts to implement these ideas. While no district, on its own, can provide the comprehensive web of opportunities and supports that children and their families need,<sup>1</sup> there are a number of ways most districts can be much smarter than they have been historically.

School districts, which emerged in the early twentieth century, grew out of the social and organizational ideas that took hold during the Industrial Revolution. “Administrative Progressives,” as this early band of reformers has become known, sought the “one best system” (Tyack 1974) that would separate schooling from politics and

produce assimilated, productive citizens as efficiently as Ford’s factories produced cars. Alongside the focus on “scientific management” was a strong belief that intelligence was innate and that race and ethnicity played a powerful role in determining an individual’s potential. The idea that only a small proportion of children were meant to succeed academically was built into school systems.

As these ideas played out over the last century, school districts became highly bureaucratic organizations that buffered schools from outside intervention (Elmore 2000). School districts attempted to standardize inputs – treating all schools, students, and educators as the same – while tolerating wide-ranging outcomes for students. By the late twentieth century, the reputation of school districts was as an obstacle to, not a catalyst for, reform.

But creating whole systems of successful schools requires school districts to be a key player in reform. As school districts evolve from their bureaucratic roots, they are struggling with a number of critical questions: What are the roles that we should keep

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<sup>1</sup> The overarching goal of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform is to help school districts and their communities create “smart education systems.” These systems aim to achieve this excellence and equity at scale by combining effective school districts with a comprehensive web of opportunities and supports for children and families, provided in partnership with the community.



and what roles should we eliminate or transfer to others? What new functions should we take on? What capacity must we have in-house and what capacities can we find in partner organizations, in the schools themselves, at city hall, and at the state department? Which decisions should be centralized and which should be made at the school level or in other entities?

As the Annenberg Institute works with school districts and communities all over the country, it is clear to us that the essential roles of school district central offices have not been adequately articulated. To fill this void, the Institute has developed a framework, based on the accumulated knowledge about effective central office practices gleaned from our work and from our own and others' research.

In this article we provide an overview of these key functions and their attendant practices. We also discuss what distinguishes this framework from other like efforts and discuss the framework's implications for school districts.

### ***The Smart District Framework***

Our framework includes the following key functions:

- Lead for Results and Equity
- Focus on Instruction
- Manage Human Capital
- Use Data for Accountability and Continuous Improvement
- Build Partnerships and Community Investment
- Align Infrastructure with Strategic Vision

#### **Lead for Results and Equity**

Smart districts develop and provide leadership necessary for the district and its schools to accomplish the goal of providing all students with an excellent education. In our formulation, responsibility and authority are firmly lodged with the superintendent, but he or she understands the need for and the power of inclusive, distributed leadership. Plans and policies are drafted by teams with expertise in the area of interest, but they are reviewed and revised through input from staff at all levels of the district and from parents and other interested citizens. Leadership sets the tone for the organization by modeling professional behavior, including clear communication and effective collaboration. To lead for results and equity, district leaders:

- collaborate with all stakeholders to develop a vision for the district and implement a strategic plan for realizing it;
- build ownership and sustain progress toward the vision through effective internal communication;

- establish a collaborative organizational culture that balances the prescription and guidance from central office with flexibility and autonomy for schools;
- develop substantive leadership at all levels of the organization;
- encourage and evaluate new ideas, methods, and partners to ensure the availability of the most effective supports and services for schools;
- ensure a service orientation toward schools and the community.

### **Focus on Instruction**

Having an instructional focus does not mean creating a lockstep, teacher-proof curriculum. Rather, it means that the central office ensures that a district’s time, attention, and resources are focused primarily on schools and student learning. Achieving this focus relies on input from school-based staff to agree on a set of common materials and approaches, so that the highest standards for instruction and learning are built into the system. These materials and approaches are supplemented with supports and timely interventions for students who are not reaching the standards, professional development opportunities for teachers, and extended learning opportunities for all. In a smart district, the central office ensures that these supports and interventions are available; they might either provide them or simply coordinate their provision. To focus on instruction, district leaders:

- establish a common curricular framework aligned with high academic standards and assessments;
- develop and implement valid and useful systems of formative and summative assessment;

- ensure appropriate supports and interventions for all students while maintaining high expectations;
- ensure extended learning opportunities and supports that facilitate learning beyond the classroom;
- develop and distribute teaching and learning tools and resources effectively.

### **Manage Human Capital**

In public education, human capital refers to the knowledge and skill sets of our educators that directly result in increased levels of learning for students. In short, we are talking about what they know and are able to do – their talent level. Given this definition, managing human capital refers to how an organization tries to acquire, increase, and sustain that talent level over time. More specifically, it refers to the entire continuum of activities and policies that affect educators over their work life at a particular school district. Given that

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In most communities, the school district is the organization with the greatest number of resources at its disposal, both fiscal and human, for serving children. But smart districts also recognize that children need more than what is available in school to be successful learners.

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teachers, principals, and those that support them are the biggest factors impacting student achievement in schools, effectively managing human capital is arguably a smart district's most important job. To manage human capital, district leaders:

- attract talent from a variety of sources, create a diverse pipeline of quality applicants, and streamline entry into the system;
- provide ongoing mentoring and support in varying levels and form;
- deploy human capital to meet the varying needs of schools and students;
- evaluate the effectiveness of personnel and provide appropriate recognition and accountability;
- ensure that all staff participate in high-quality professional development that is tied to evaluation and, whenever appropriate, supports instruction;
- provide competitive compensation and a variety of incentives for achieving excellence and meeting goals;

- establish a career track for teachers that provides varied challenges and advancement opportunities for the most effective individuals.

#### **Use Data for Accountability and Continuous Improvement**

To achieve results, smart districts need to know current and past results and what they have to do to improve those results. Districts and their partners need to develop sophisticated and user-friendly data collection and analysis systems that enable them to monitor the performance of young people, schools, programs, personnel, and the partners themselves against the results they expect. Smart districts integrate not only the collection of data, but also the serious and regular examination of data into the normal operating procedures of schools and districts. To use data for accountability, district leaders:

- collect, organize, analyze, and act on data and help others throughout the system to do so;
- monitor outcomes of students, schools, and district personnel, as well as indicators that impact those outcomes;
- evaluate the effectiveness of implemented programs;

- evaluate the effectiveness of personnel;
- ensure technology and support necessary for timely and effective use of data.

### **Build Partnerships and Community Investment**

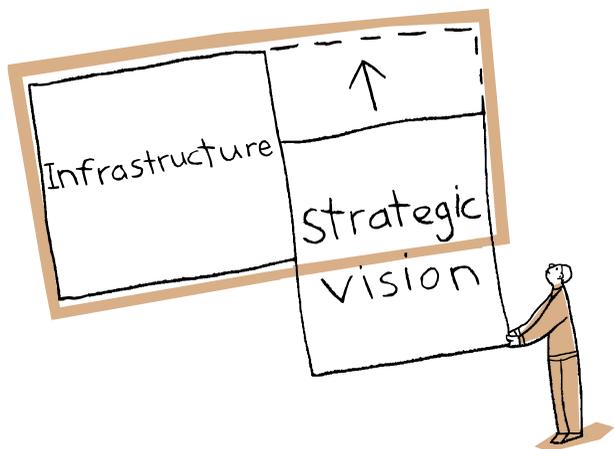
In most communities, the school district is the organization with the greatest number of resources at its disposal, both fiscal and human, for serving children. In addition, it is the entity charged with ensuring the academic success of those children. But smart districts also recognize that children need more than what is available in school to be successful learners. Therefore, smart districts embrace the responsibility to advocate strongly for supports that address the needs of the students they serve both in *and* outside of school. Smart districts partner with and involve a wide spectrum of community members, organizations, and agencies to set and achieve the overarching goals of the district. These partners share information widely and have regular, respectful conversations among themselves to help ensure distributed leadership, responsibility, and accountability for results. To build partnerships and community investment, district leaders:

- broker partnerships to increase resources for schools and students;
- collaborate with multiple sectors of the community to set district priorities and identify strategies for realizing them;
- advocate for a web of community supports and coordinate partnerships to provide them;
- communicate effectively externally;
- regularly seek community input and feedback.

### **Align Infrastructure with Strategic Vision**

School districts are complex organizations involved not only in educating young people but also in transporting them, feeding them, paying their teachers, and complying with state and federal mandates. Smart districts manage their operations and resources to ensure an appropriate learning environment and support systems for all schools and students. Smart districts employ sound management practices, ensuring that the buses run on time, legal obligations are met, paychecks go out, and facilities are conducive to learning. Finally, they make clear the difference between board and central office roles and responsibilities. To align the infrastructure with the strategic vision, district leaders:

- ensure the equitable, efficient, and transparent distribution of public and private resources;
- ensure clean, safe, and well-maintained facilities that allow for productive learning environments;



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Whether under a traditional governance structure or new models like mayoral control, smart districts actively look to create important partnerships that are critical to their success.

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- implement policies that support the district’s focus on instruction and its accountability for results and equity in alignment with legal requirements;
- develop a technology infrastructure that enables central office and school-based staff to do their jobs efficiently;
- attend to the logistical needs of students so that they arrive on time and are ready to learn throughout the day.

### ***What’s Different about This Framework?***

The Annenberg Institute is certainly not alone in its efforts to catalog and describe what effective school districts and central offices do. This framework is different because it focuses on both *what* school districts should do and *how* they do it. The last decade or so of research on school districts has touched on several of these functions.

Focusing on instruction and using data, for example, are two areas that have been clearly established in the literature as key roles for school districts (see, for example, Cawelti & Protheroe 2003; Corbett & Wilson 1991; Massell & Goertz 1999; Murphy & Hallinger 1988; Shannon & Bylsma 2004; Snipes, Doolittle & Herlihy 2002; Springboard Schools 2006; Togneri & Anderson 2003).

But there has been little information provided about *how* districts develop these functions. Our framework includes not only the functions and practices that school districts should focus on, but also on the ways they should approach their work. Below we describe the key values that are infused throughout our framework.

### **Smart Districts and Their Central Offices Collaborate and Partner in Critical Ways**

Smart districts acknowledge that ensuring an excellent education for all students is not something they can achieve alone. They foster substantive collaboration within themselves as well as with important community stakeholders. Whether under a traditional governance structure or new models like mayoral control, smart districts actively look to create important partnerships that are critical to their success – partnerships with entities like education management organizations that run portfolios of public schools, child and family service organizations that tend to the health and welfare of students and their families, and service-provider organizations that have expertise in things like quality after-school programs or targeted recruitment that the district may lack. This sentiment comes through in virtually every function in the framework.

### **Smart Districts Are Communicative and Transparent**

Smart districts consistently strive for a high level of transparency. They ensure opportunities for community participation in goal setting and governance; provide clear and consistent explanations for district decisions to district staff and external parties; and work to build investment in their vision and plans through ongoing dialogue with all stakeholders in various forums.

### **Smart Districts Are Committed to Equity**

Smart districts champion the cause of equity throughout the district through communication with the community, strategic allocation of resources, and nurturing of high expectations. They recognize that creating equity for students does not simply mean dividing resources equally, but rather that it means providing to each student what he or she needs to be successful.

### **Smart Districts Are Service Oriented**

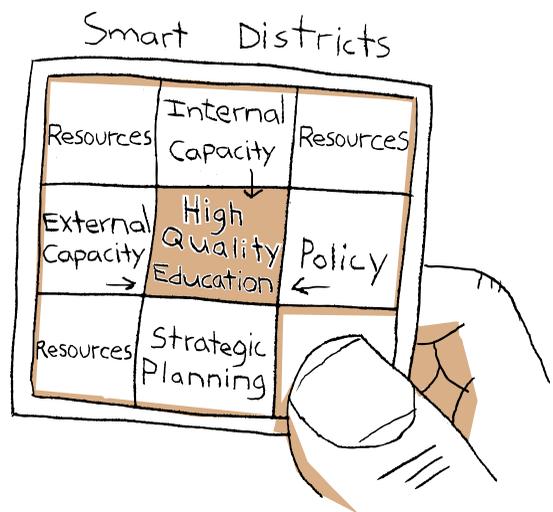
Smart districts recognize students, families, the community, schools, and educators as their partners and work to serve and support them to ensure children have what they need to be successful.

### **Smart Districts Are Coherent**

Smart districts play the key role of aligning resources, internal and external capacity, policy, and strategic planning to ensure that students have everything they need to be successful and to receive a high-quality education.

### ***Implications for School Districts***

The implications for districts are straightforward, but not necessarily easy to implement. District leaders, at the behest of boards or in the face of community pressure, must focus



on practical questions necessary for day-to-day operations (e.g., Should school supervision be organized by grade level or K–12 feeder patterns? What curriculum support materials should we purchase?). But they must also make time for even more important questions and reflection on whether they are fulfilling the most important roles that districts must play if all students are to be guaranteed the opportunity for an excellent education. Moreover, they must look carefully at how they play these roles and the values they foster in their approach to the work. This framework attempts to impart the importance of developing the capacity to work in these essential areas and in these essential ways.

We have already used this framework to help districts catalogue the challenges they face, to understand the capacity that exists among school district employees, to organize potential supports from outside the district, and to reflect on where they need to improve. While many large urban school districts are making progress in educating all students and reducing achievement gaps, none of the examples of district turnaround have achieved the goal of *all* students reaching proficiency.

This framework is, of necessity, a work in progress – like the development of smart districts. In the future we hope to build specific tools for districts, based on the framework, that will help them and their communities identify, not just what they should be doing and how they should be doing it, but also how to get from where they are to where they need to be.

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# Urban School District Central Offices and the Implementation of New Small Autonomous Schools Initiatives

Meredith I. Honig

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*Central office staff in Chicago and Oakland played key roles in implementing major reform initiatives.*

*This article has been adapted by the author from her forthcoming article "No Small Thing: School District Central Office Bureaucracies and the Implementation of New Small Autonomous Schools Initiatives," in American Educational Research Journal.*

New small autonomous schools initiatives have spread to urban districts nationwide. While their designs vary, these initiatives generally aim to convert large public high schools into multiple, smaller, more autonomous schools and to create new small autonomous public schools of various types. Initiative advocates argue, in part, that the sheer diversity of students in urban districts – and, arguably, other mid-sized to large districts – increases the urgency to reinvent schools into newer, smaller, more autonomous units that are more rigorous, caring, and responsive to individual students.

In turn, district central offices would expand student learning district-wide if they helped schools build their capacity for making key decisions about how to support their students, rather than mainly directed schools' decisions. Such forms of district central office support depart starkly from traditional central office roles as regulators of or non-participants in reform efforts. What, more specifically, do urban school district central offices do when they enable the implementation of new small autonomous schools initiatives?

Educational research has shed little light on this question. For example, many studies of new small autonomous schools initiatives focus on school-level outcomes and implementation processes (e.g., American Institutes for Research & SRI International 2003, 2004; Spote, Correa, Kahne & Easton 2003; Darling-Hammond, Aneess & Ort 2002; Raywid 2002; Raywid, Schmerler, Phillips & Smith 2003; Wallach & Gallucci 2004; Wallach & Lear 2003). Such studies typically argue that central offices – and usually formal central office policies such as mandated curriculum – curb implementation. However, such studies generally do not reveal how central offices might *enable* implementation.

These studies are also limited because they tend to draw their conclusions about central offices from a handful of one-time interviews with central office administrators or surveys of school principals regarding what and how well their central offices are doing. Single self-reports and principals' reports provide important perspectives on central office participation. But, especially since most central office work unfolds over time and beyond the view of school principals, such data sources are significantly incomplete in what they teach about how central offices

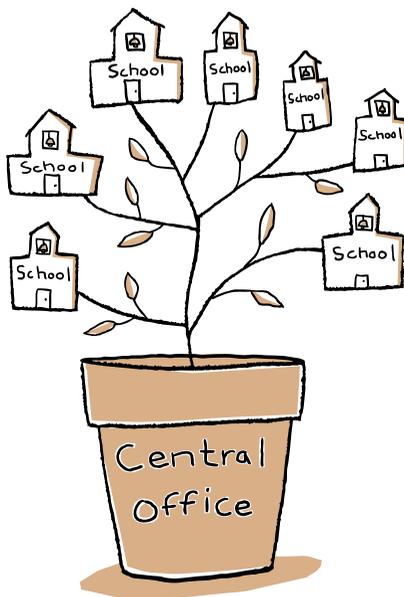
*Meredith I. Honig is an assistant professor of educational leadership and policy studies at the University of Washington in Seattle.*

might participate more productively in implementation. Other research on districts suggests that individual central office administrators' relationships with schools may be more consequential to implementation of ambitious change initiatives than formal policy changes (e.g., Burch & Spillane 2004; Honig 2006).

Given these considerations, I concluded that a next generation of research on new small autonomous schools initiatives should focus on central office administrators who aim to enable implementation and aim to reveal what they do and how they do it. Such administrators were likely to find few roadmaps for their work and discover that they must invent their work on the job. Accordingly, research should focus attention on districts where central office administrators stood a good chance of having the resources, political

support, and freedom to invent their work in ways that promised to enable implementation.

Two such districts were Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) in California and Chicago Public Schools (CPS). During my period of study (2001–2003 in OUSD and 2003–2006 in CPS), central office administrators in both districts actively engaged in developing new, nontraditional implementation support relationships with schools and with other central office administrators. Various resources (e.g., major grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, supportive executive-level district leadership, and various external partners) were available to bolster their efforts. In this article, I summarize key lessons from my in-depth examination of central office administrators' participation in implementation in those two districts.<sup>1</sup> These lessons reveal how certain central office administrators can work between the central office and participating schools to enable implementation.



<sup>1</sup> My studies in OUSD and CPS involved a total of 138 interviews with 89 respondents; meeting observations; and extensive document reviews. I collected these data over three academic years in each district. For a full discussion of study methods, see the original source material in Honig (in press). The findings reported here relate specifically to how central office administrators participated in the ongoing implementation of new small autonomous schools initiatives. These findings do not include central office administrators' work during a distinct start-up period – the period immediately following the passage of the enabling school board policies in both districts, during which central office administrators mainly focused on initial school selection and helping those first schools open their doors. I report on central office participation in this distinct start-up phase in a separate paper currently in progress.

## ***How School District Central Offices Enabled Implementation***

In both districts, certain central office administrators — those in offices dedicated to the implementation of the new small autonomous schools initiatives — enabled implementation through two main strategies. As elaborated in this article, these strategies, in broad terms, involved bridging schools to but also buffering schools from the rest of the central office.<sup>2</sup> These findings, overall, underscore the importance of understanding district central office participation in implementation, not mainly as a technical problem of developing better formal policy, but as a human challenge of helping central office administrators work with schools and other central office administrators in new, dynamic ways.

### **New Support Relationships**

*Dedicated, non-traditional central office administrators worked between the central office and schools to negotiate new support relationships between the two.*

Leaders in both districts created offices specifically dedicated to the implementation of their new small autonomous schools initiatives. Both offices launched with one central office administrator and one support staff person and grew over the three years of my study to include between six and ten central office administrators. Most of the administrators in these small schools offices (SSOs) were new to central office work and came from careers in private business, public policy,

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**In both districts, certain central office administrators enabled implementation through two main strategies. These strategies involved bridging schools to but also buffering schools from the rest of the central office.**

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and private and public interest law firms and reportedly had limited investments in central office careers. Given their new work contexts, backgrounds, and career trajectories, SSO administrators seemed to operate relatively unfettered by traditional top-down central office roles and routines that can impede implementation of some change initiatives. These SSO administrators worked over time to craft new support relationships between central offices and schools that enabled implementation.

### **Bridging and Buffering**

*In the new, dynamic support relationships, SSO administrators both bridged schools to and buffered schools from the rest of the central office.*

SSO administrators enabled implementation by variably engaging in two broad types of work practices, depending on

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<sup>2</sup> For a fuller account of the outcomes associated with these activities, please see the original source material cited in Honig (in press).

schools' capacity and other conditions: bridging and buffering between schools and their central office. Both proved consequential to implementation.

#### **BRIDGING**

Bridging included activities that increased central office administrators' and school leaders' engagement with the other. Their specific bridging activities focused on three areas:

1. *Policy/practice development: linking other central office administrators with evidence from schools' plans and experiences to advocate for immediate district policy and practice changes.*

Such ongoing policy and practice development activities seemed particularly important to implementation, given the autonomy provisions of the initiative. Those provisions invited a range of school innovations that policy-makers could not anticipate at the point of policy design and that occasionally conflicted with central office policies and practices.

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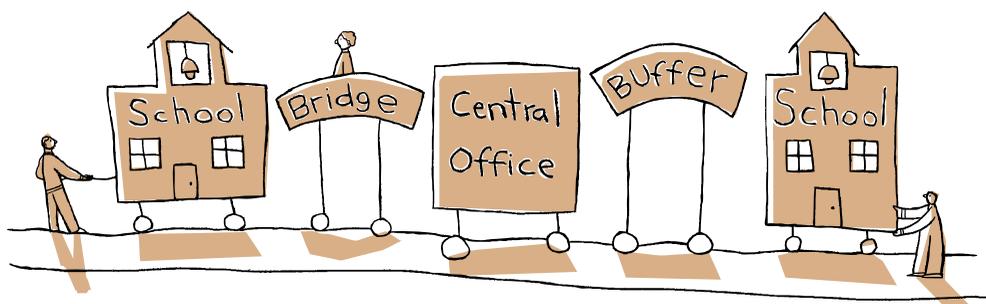
**SSO administrators in both districts bolstered implementation by advocating for central office policy and practice changes that promised to support implementation of individual school plans.**

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Likewise, the school board policies that authorized the new small autonomous schools initiatives tended to call for school autonomy in general but not to elaborate how the central office might actually enable schools to have autonomy, especially when the promised autonomy conflicted with other school district policies. Avoiding such potentially controversial decisions at the point of policy design may have enabled passage of the original policy, but it left in place various policies and practices that potentially impeded implementation.

SSO administrators in both districts bolstered implementation by advocating for central office policy and practice changes that promised to support implementation of individual school plans. For example, participating schools in CPS, like all other CPS schools, reported to an Area Instructional Officer (AIO) – a central office administrator assigned to evaluate and support schools in a particular geographic region. SSO administrators, in partnership with others, pressed for and eventually secured an AIO specifically for the new small autonomous schools. One of them explained in an interview that the AIOs were a main conduit through which various resources and legitimacy flowed; as new small autonomous schools came on line and spread across multiple AIOs, SSO administrators found that the AIOs did not always work with the schools in ways that aimed to support their individual school plans.

Examples of policy and practice development in OUSD typically involved efforts to influence ambitious reforms of entire central office units in support of new small auto-



mous schools' implementation and overall central office improvement. For instance, one SSO administrator worked with finance and budget office staff people to create a new budgeting system for the district to facilitate the autonomies promised to the participating schools and, eventually, to extend those freedoms to all district public schools. Another SSO administrator engaged staff in the human resources department in reinventing how they worked with schools to improve their responsiveness to schools' particular human resource needs, especially when it came to helping the participating schools hire teachers and staff who supported their specific new small autonomous schools improvement plans.

2. *Capacity building: linking themselves with other central office administrators to build their relationships with and knowledge of participating schools for future central office policy and practice changes.*

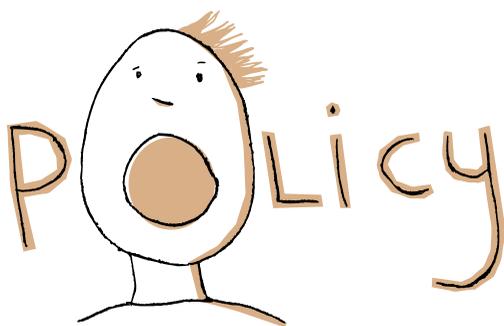
Such activities seemed essential to enabling implementation, since SSO administrators generally did not have formal authority over other central office units whose policies and practices affected small schools implementation.

Through various knowledge and relationship strategies, SSO administrators increased other central office administrators' investments in and ability to respond to the participating schools in ways that resulted in or promised to seed future policy and practice changes supportive of implementation.

In both districts, SSO administrators' main strategies for central office knowledge and relationship building involved their attending other central office units' meetings, joining their work groups, or supporting the work of those other units in other ways. For instance, one CPS SSO administrator recounted attending staff meetings of the central office accountability unit so that when they began revising their implementation strategy for No Child Left Behind, the administrator would be "at the table" to shape how that strategy unfolded in service of the participating schools. Others described helping other central office administra-

tors with their own work challenges, because “when I solve those little problems, I create trust; and then when I come to these other problems [related to the participating schools], they will trust me.”

In OUSD, such efforts included an SSO administrator facilitating meetings of the superintendent’s cabinet. The administrator explained, “I knew if I [wanted] them [other central office administrators] working on the ground for the ... schools ..., some things needed to happen with the assistant sups [superintendents]. They needed a



connection to the work.” One OUSD SSO administrator worked with each major central office department, as one explained, “so that we would get to know and build relationships with one department.” According to one administrator, through these processes other central office administrators came to understand that their own work demanded that they understand “more what the schools really needed” and that they needed to be “willing to go outside their little defined job to get it.”

3. *Communicating external requirements: linking schools to central office and other external demands to bring schools’ policies and practices in line with them in the short term while they worked to change central office policies and practice to support schools’ plans over the long term.*

As one CPS SSO administrator explained, the promise of generally underspecified autonomies in the school board policies meant “[schools] think they have autonomies, and in actuality there is nothing written. ... The autonomies have not been spelled out. There is a policy, but it has not been signed as a contract.” The administrator went on to explain that, absent clear agreements about what the policy authorized schools to do, schools operated in a precarious legal position; and it became the job of the administrator to protect schools by ensuring they worked within the law as the administrator understood it. For example, one school’s approach to teaching and learning specifically called for evaluating student work by means other than conventional letter grades – an approach that directly conflicted with district and state policies related to grading. SSO administrators worked with that school in the long term to translate their student evaluations into letter grades while working to secure supportive formal policy changes.

Likewise, as part of their professional development for participating schools, OUSD SSO administrators invited other central office staff, in the words of one, “to define what the autonomies were, what was negotiable and wasn’t negotiable, and to come and provide information [to participating school principals] about the logistical stuff around starting a school and be available to answer questions.”

Another central office administrator described these meetings as focused on clarifying state and central office policies schools should follow as a short-term strategy to help with implementation while they built central office administrators' knowledge of and relationships with the initiative for future policy and practice changes more supportive of schools' local improvement plans. All central office administrators who participated in these presentations reported that their knowledge of participating schools increased through their participation in these presentations and that their participation prompted them to develop strategies for increasing their office's responsiveness to participating schools.

#### **BUFFERING**

Buffering included activities that limited contact between the central office and schools, generally with the aim of helping schools avoid potentially unproductive inspection and intervention by other central offices administrators – inspection and intervention that threatened to derail implementation of schools' local improvement plans. Specific buffering activities included the following:

1. *Providing school-level assistance: limiting central office intervention with schools by mediating school-level conflicts themselves and coaching school improvement.*

In CPS, where the initiative mainly involved the conversion of large high schools into smaller units sharing the same campus, such assistance frequently involved SSO administrators resolving conflicts that arose between new small

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Central office administrators came to understand that their own work demanded that they understand “more what the schools really needed” and that they needed to be “willing to go outside their little defined job to get it.”

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autonomous schools on the same school campuses. One central office administrator explained that such conflicts threatened to create a “really negative feeling between CPS . . . and those schools” and to increase potentially unproductive central office intervention in those schools. As one main strategy for mitigating such conflicts, SSO administrators lobbied for and eventually secured the creation of a “campus manager” position at each converting high school to resolve school conflicts on site before they escalated to other central office administrators.

Accountability policies in effect at the time of my study called for central office administrators to intervene in schools with limited academic gains. SSO administrators buffered schools from such intervention by coaching schools on improving the quality of their academic programs. In CPS, the dedicated academic affairs director within the SSO and, eventually, the AIO assigned to the participating schools

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Principals typically reflected that their direct contact with the superintendent helped them avoid, in one principal's words, "someone coming in suddenly and saying 'Why are you doing that?' or 'You need to work with [a particular school-support organization],' when none of those providers gets what we are trying to do."

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provided such academic supports. In OUSD, over time, the participating principals reported directly to the superintendent, who provided direct support for principals' instructional leadership. For example, when asked about the focus of their regular meetings with the superintendent, principals generally made comments similar to one who said, "Mostly... my personal growth. He pushes you." Principals typically reflected that their direct contact with the superintendent helped them avoid, in one principal's words, "someone coming in suddenly and saying 'Why are you doing that?' or 'You need to work with [a particular school-support organization],' when none of those providers gets what we are trying to do."

2. *Absorbing potential and actual scrutiny: limiting central office intervention by taking responsibility for schools' deviations from central office policies and practices.*

For example, in CPS two SSO administrators described how a school developed an application process for students interested in attending their school that some in the school and community believed violated the new small autonomous schools policy that participating schools have "open enrollment." The school principal told an SSO administrator that they did not intend to systematically exclude students, which did violate central office policy, but to ensure that their school included students who supported their particular school philosophy and that such support was essential to their implementation.

An SSO administrator subsequently developed a process for negotiating school-specific enrollment policies with the SSO office, as part of which the administrator would run the decisions by executive central office

staff and others – not for permission, but as a “notice of disclosure and then proceed” process. The administrator explained that other central office administrators might disagree with their approach to enrollment, but that such disagreement would then become a matter of negotiation between the SSO and other central office units while the participating schools operated under a central office “policy of a sort.”

In an example from OUSD, an SSO administrator described one school that wanted to open as an “innovative school organized around internships with kids working on their own individualized learning plans” and low teacher-to-student ratios. The superintendent wanted to “pull” this school because he did not think the school’s planning process had provided a sufficient foundation for success. The SSO administrator argued that the school had adequate curricular plans and other structures in place and that the administrator would take personal responsibility for supporting the school. The superintendent reportedly responded, “If it is a mess, then it is on your head, because I’m not authorizing it.”

Later in implementation, the SSO administrator reported, “I was... there yesterday at their exhibits [presentations of student work]... and they are doing great... and now I am fighting for next year so they can move and grow their school... until we get our shin kicked.”

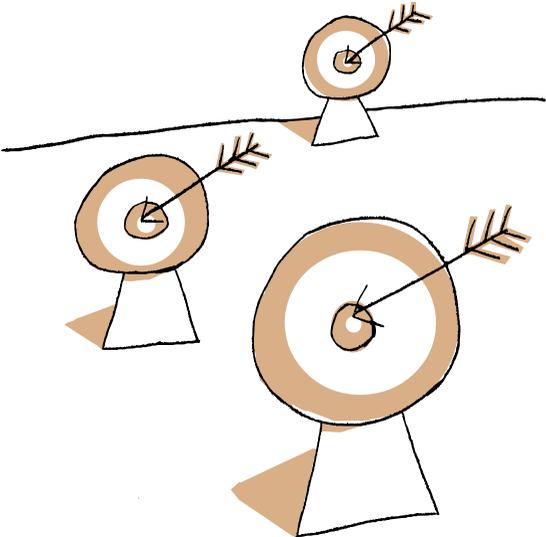
***Selected Implications for Practice***

The lessons suggested by this study have important implications for those interested in supporting urban school district central office administrators in participating productively in the

implementation of new small autonomous schools initiatives and other efforts that call for central office administrators to partner with schools in new, supportive ways.

**Invest in building central office capacity.**

In a departure from the majority of research studies on new small autonomous schools initiatives that focus on schools, this study reveals the important ways central office administrators enable implementation. Such bridging and buffering activities are a far cry from central office administration-as-usual in some districts, where central office administrators traditionally have not engaged in such strategic, problem-solving, school-support relationships with schools. Such traditions suggest



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## How can central office leaders, funders, and others make strategic investments, not only in schools, but also in building central office administrators' capacity for engaging in work practices that support implementation of promising school-improvement efforts?

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that central office administrators may not have the ready capacity to engage in such work practices.

In partial support of this claim, the SSO administrators in this study seemed to do so well in part because they were not traditional central office employees. In their central office policy and practice development and capacity-building work, they generally found themselves swimming upstream – helping other central administrators build their capacity for stepping outside the traditional trappings of their longstanding work to support schools.

Their experience raises the question: How can central office leaders, funders, and others make strategic investments, not only in schools, but also in building central office administrators' capacity for engaging in work practices that support implementation of promising school-improvement efforts? Such investments might focus on the identification and further development of new central office work practices such as bridging and buffering, as well as professional supports for

central office administrators to engage in those practices. Such investments may challenge funders, too – especially those accustomed to investing mainly in schools and not in central offices as key levers for school improvement – to swim against the tide of their own longstanding practices.

### **Build out ecologies of support for new central office work.**

Even with such investments in central offices, central office participation in initiatives like new small autonomous schools likely will remain profoundly challenging for central office administrators. Central office administrators' ability to manage such challenges may depend significantly on broader ecologies of support for their new work practices. External central office support organizations seem essential participants in such an ecology of support (Honig under review, 2004). Whole industries have built up around helping schools engage in particular reform approaches and work practices. How can these or other organizations build their capacity to support *central office administrators* in creating the conditions and relationships with schools obviously essential to enabling such reform approaches?

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# Redesigning the Central Office to Deliver Better Value

Andrew Moffit

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*The corporate sector offers lessons in how district central offices might be redesigned to serve schools more effectively.*

The central offices of large urban school districts are, in many ways, quite similar to the corporate centers of large corporations or other organizations. When designed effectively, these centers ensure that their key operating units – whether a handful of related businesses or a diverse set of units in thousands of locations – can achieve their shared performance goals (in terms of income and other key metrics). Similarly, the central offices of large urban school districts exist to ensure that their primary operating units – individual schools – consistently produce effective teaching and learning, which has the most direct impact on the district’s performance goals (in terms of student outcome and other metrics). The central offices of most large urban school districts, however, often are seen as ineffective bureaucracies, which impede, rather than enhance, the core efforts of their schools to improve student outcomes (Ucelli, Foley & Mishook 2007).

While nearly all large urban school districts regularly articulate ambitious goals and produce strategic plans to achieve them, few have rigorously

evaluated the role their central offices should play to ensure the success of those strategies. Instead, most central offices control a wide range of activities – from setting curricular policies and providing related training to recruiting and placing staff in schools to managing school facilities and providing back-office services – for historical reasons, as opposed to clear strategic rationale or even an understanding of the specific value they provide to support effective teaching and learning in their schools. As a result, there is often a misalignment between what the central office of a large urban district does and what the schools might actually need.

There is a growing recognition that to meet the ambitious goals of large urban school districts – in terms of dramatically improved student outcomes and elimination of achievement gaps – a significant revamping of the central offices is necessary (Ucelli, Foley & Mishook 2007). To that end, large urban school districts might look to the experiences of corporations or other large organizations with effective corporate centers.

Specifically, such organizations recognize the challenges of managing large, complex entities centrally and push to define a smaller “true”

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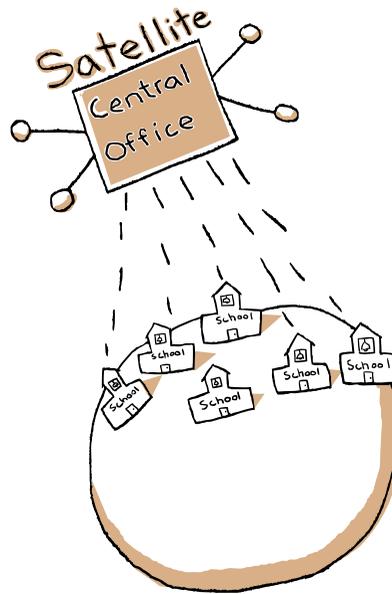
corporate center, responsible only for those activities with a clear rationale for centralization, such as significant strategic advantages or economies of scale. These organizations also restructure their centers explicitly around delivering these narrowed sets of activities.

To be sure, there is great variation in the effectiveness of corporate centers, and not all examples from the private or other sectors are relevant for large urban school districts. Nonetheless, the experiences of corporations or organizations – for which the impact of effective organizational design on their performance has been recognized (see, generally, Bryan & Joyce 2007) – can be instructive.

There is no single answer for the role or design of the center of any organization, and any organization's answer can shift over time, depending on the organization's context and its performance goals. However, there are three key steps that effective corporations or organizations – regardless of industry or sector – follow to ensure their center adds value to its operating units and is an effective driver of overall performance:

- Ensure a clear strategic mandate for the center, guided by involvement of key internal stakeholders, in alignment with overall strategy.
- Informed by this strategic mandate, categorize key activities according to the value they create and determine the center's role in their provision.
- Design formal organizational structure and key supporting mechanisms accordingly.

This article explores how the central offices of large urban school districts might apply these key steps to ensure that they deliver strategic value to their schools and, ultimately,



enhance the district's student outcome performance goals. It incorporates examples from select large urban school districts that have reexamined the strategic role of their central offices and redesigned their central functions accordingly.

### ***Ensure a Clear Strategic Mandate***

Frequently, discussions about optimizing the center focus immediately on organizational design. However, it is important first to define a clear strategic mandate for the center – in light of the overall strategy for the corporation or organization – detailing how the center will add value to its operating units. This strategic mandate will vary by the unique context and relative strengths of



the center, but it is important to focus the center only on those activities in which it can provide unique value to its units. As examples, the corporate center mandate of many financial institutions focuses on building and maintaining customer relationships and managing risk across a multitude of diverse businesses; at General Electric, in contrast, the strategic mandate has been more internally focused, famously revolving around developing and managing a world-class management team, entrusted to make critical decisions for their units.

High-performing school systems vary in the mandate and role they define for their centers. Some high-performing school systems are highly centralized, leaving very little but execu-

tion to the schools (e.g., Singapore), while other systems have pushed much greater autonomy to their schools (e.g., New Zealand, Sweden). In general, there is a trend toward greater school-level autonomy, which, research suggests, under the right conditions, can drive overall performance.<sup>1</sup>

A few large urban school districts, including New York City, Oakland, and Edmonton, have adopted districtwide strategies that emphasize devolving significant control over key budgetary and operating decisions to their schools. These districts also have taken the important step of redefining their strategic mandate for their central offices – principally, to focus on setting clear expectations and accountability measures and providing selective supports to their schools – in alignment with those overall strategies. In so doing, they purposefully have narrowed the key areas in which the central office attempts to add value to its schools and have reorganized many of their central activities and functions accordingly. Select examples of the application of these strategic decisions for their central offices are addressed more fully in the next section of this article.

Regardless of the resulting nature of this strategic mandate, it is important for key internal stakeholders to be directly involved in the process of defining it. Engaging leaders of both central office departments and schools can be instrumental to accurately defining the needs of the schools and

<sup>1</sup> “System factor that was associated with performance even after accounting for socio-economic background: Education systems where schools reported a higher degree of autonomy in budgeting (students in education systems with one additional standard deviation on the index of autonomy in budgeting score 25.7 points higher, all other things being equal)” (OECD 2007, p. 44).

evaluating how well the central office currently meets those needs. Moreover, this type of engagement can produce the necessary buy-in and commitment to the new strategic mandate for successful implementation.

### ***Categorize Key Activities***

Once the strategic mandate for the center has been defined, the entire roster of activities potentially performed by the center can be evaluated to determine who should control and/or provide them. Although the most appropriate approach differs by context, highly effective centers focus on the leanest design possible, pushing decision making to the operating units where possible, unless there is a compelling reason, such as significant strategic consequences or economies of scale, to centralize. This is particularly true in complex organizations such as large urban school districts, where significant local variation in the needs of individual units such as schools is often present.

There are three distinct types of activities for which the center can add value to its operating units: safeguarding, servicing, and shaping. *Safeguarding* activities primarily serve to protect the entity from threats to its survival, generally with little upside potential. These are the core fiduciary and compliance tasks of the center. *Servicing* activities refer to services that generate cost savings if consolidated. They typically have modest potential to improve overall performance. *Shaping* activities typically reflect the primary strategic rationale for the center and most impact the organization's core businesses and their performance. These activities could include providing strategic guidance to the units, setting expectations and managing their performance, building core capabilities

across the system, and promoting synergies across the units. As they have significant potential to create or destroy value and exponentially impact attainment of overall goals, the center's role must be chosen carefully.

For all the activities in each category, the potential benefits of retaining control in the center, given its strategic mandate and relative capacity, can be weighed against those associated with devolving control over decision making to the operating units, which are closest to the needs on the ground.

Simply identifying the key activities to be controlled by the center, however, does not fully inform the role of the center in providing each activity. Certain services controlled by the center could be delivered by third parties through a contract arrangement (which the center would manage); alternatively, for activities controlled by the units, the center – depending on its relative capacity – could serve as one of several eligible providers of that activity.

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School districts regularly aggregate demand across their system – and in so doing, enjoy scale benefits – by controlling a wide range of key servicing activities, such as those related to human resources (payroll processing, benefits management), information technology, transportation, food service, and procurement.

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### **Safeguarding**

Safeguarding activities protect an entity from threats to its basic survival, but generally do little to help achieve the organization’s performance goals. In the private sector, these might mean handling financial distress, major lawsuits, reputation problems, or criminal problems. As they implicate core fiduciary or compliance responsibilities, the center nearly always owns these activities.

School districts face an analogous set of regulatory, financial, and political “threats” that must be rigorously monitored and actively managed. Specifically, districts need regular processes for setting, and ensuring compliance with, both internal and external policies or regulations – for example, use of funds, special education programs, workforce provisions – to avoid risk of lawsuits. Moreover, in light of state accountability systems, districts must effectively

and consistently measure performance of their schools. They also need transparent financial reporting and controls in place to prevent budget-driven interruptions to ongoing operations. Finally, they also need effective external relations and communications functions to ensure consistent messaging to, and proper engagement of, key stakeholders, particularly those members of school boards or other oversight bodies, parents, or other local leaders with significant influence on the district’s strategic direction (and its leadership, in particular).

Given their critical importance to the basic existence of the school district (and risks associated with variances in their approach), these activities are uniformly controlled, and nearly always delivered, by the central office of school districts.

### **Servicing**

Servicing activities derive their primary benefit from aggregation across the system, but their execution generally has limited potential to impact key performance goals. As such, there is a presumption that the center should control their provision as the benefits of scale typically outweigh any benefits

accrued through empowering individual units. These include activities that, when aggregated, are more efficiently performed for at least the same quality, or those that can only be done cost-effectively when aggregated (e.g., various procurement, human resources, or information technology functions; transportation; food services).

For such activities, corporations typically create internal “shared services” functions (if they believe they have significant internal capacity to deliver it effectively) or manage a contract with a third party (if they believe costs associated with developing requisite internal capacity are not justified). There is an emerging trend in “professionalizing” shared services through service-level agreements (SLAs), which incorporate key performance indicators (often made easier by the transactional or operational nature of such activities), or other accountability provisions.

School districts regularly aggregate demand across their system – and in so doing, enjoy scale benefits – by controlling a wide range of key servicing activities, such as those related to human resources (payroll processing, benefits management), information technology, transportation, food service, and procurement. However, except for transportation and food service, large urban school districts are much less apt to manage contracts with third-party providers for servicing activities. More important, perhaps, even fewer large urban school districts have established clear metrics to manage the performance of their service providers (whether internal or exter-

nal). A notable exception is Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), which utilizes a set of operating performance metrics to evaluate all of its central office functions and service providers.

### Shaping

Shaping activities typically reflect the primary strategic rationale for the center and most impact (or “shape”) the organization’s business units and their resulting performance. The center’s role in shaping activities typically shows the greatest variance, as effective corporations or other large organizations strive to define only a few areas – often called “centers of excellence” – in which they can truly add value to their operating units. Most often, corporate center shaping activities revolve around the top talent development, business performance management, and mergers and acquisitions. Other activities, such as staff selection, training, and development, are often managed within business units.

In most large urban school districts, on the other hand, a broad set of key shaping activities – ranging from staff recruitment, selection and place-



ment, professional development and training student supports – remain the dominion of the central office. In fact, most districts do not differentiate between the control needed for safeguarding and servicing activities from that most appropriate for shaping activities. Of course, there are many shaping activities – such as intervening in low-performing schools, managing a school portfolio to ensure appropriate options, creating a pipeline of talented applicants, managing the performance of school leaders – which should remain under control of the central office, in nearly all cases, for strategic and/or scale reasons. But for the remaining activities (which potentially could be controlled by either central office or the schools), there is an opportunity for district leaders to rigorously examine and, based on the district's relative capacity and strategic mandate, identify the narrow set for which the central office can provide significant value to its schools.

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It is important to address mechanisms that align incentives with these organizational structure changes, inculcate the changes in employees, and drive accountability for the changes across the organization.

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As mentioned earlier, several large urban school districts have empowered their schools to control provision of select shaping activities, which significantly changed the role of their central offices. For example, since 1994, Edmonton Public Schools (EPS) has provided its schools with significant control over their budgets, including the ability to select from various services and providers. In response, the district's central office was renamed Central Services, which continues to provide teacher professional development and student assessment tools to schools, in competition with outside vendors. Similarly, the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) enables its school leaders to select the provider for a suite of teaching and learning functions, including instructional coaching, professional development, and student supports, from among a set of external and internal options (to create the latter, NYCDOE transformed key portions of its Teaching and Learning department into independent Learning Support Organizations to compete with one another and other providers). In both instances, however, the central office retained control of key shaping activities, such as setting curricular guidelines, managing accountability of schools, developing knowledge management opportunities, and building a pipeline of qualified teachers and principals, for which it determined it was best positioned to add value to its schools.

Rigorously determining the appropriate role of the central office in the provision of key activities in each of these three categories can be a critical step to ensuring that the strategic mandate of the central office is actually put into practice.

## ***Design the Formal Organizational Structure and Key Supporting Mechanisms***

A well-defined strategic mandate for the central office can provide clear criteria to redesign its formal organizational structure accordingly (e.g., Which activities should be grouped together? Who should report to whom? Are staffing levels of central functions aligned with revised strategic role?). It is equally important, however, to address mechanisms that align incentives with these organizational structure changes, inculcate the changes in employees, and drive accountability for the changes across the organization.

To ensure clarity regarding respective responsibilities, both NYCDOE and OUSD publish detailed guides for their school leaders, describing the nature and promised output of key services, identifying key contacts for particular services, and outlining processes for customer service. To ensure accountability, the performance expectations for each such service in NYCDOE and OUSD were formalized in SLAs, which detail not only what service levels customers can expect to receive, but what happens if those levels are not satisfactorily met. OUSD, EPS, and other systems utilize feedback surveys of their customers and widely publish their results. Finally, both NYCDOE and OUSD use straightforward selection processes to ensure that artificial “barriers to switching” do not materially depress incentives to perform.

Separately, the central office’s organizational culture – the predisposition of its people to behave in certain ways – needs to be aligned with its strategic role. Such cultural change must begin with clear and regular articulation of the kinds of change the central office desires and visible effort



of leaders to listen to staff reactions. Employees must believe that they have the ability to behave in new ways, which might involve programs to upgrade talent (hiring, replacing, retaining) and/or build capabilities (on-the-job development, training programs, support tools). To promote its new focus on customer service, OUSD supplemented significant training and development opportunities with other “softer” efforts, including a popular T-shirt (modeled on the Oakland Raiders football team logo) highlighting OUSD’s key customer service aspirations, which central office staff could wear on select Fridays. Marrying organizational changes with reinforcing

mechanisms increases the likelihood of achieving culture change.

A thoughtful and rigorous examination of their strategic role – a process which might be revisited every few years – can improve the ability of central offices of large urban districts to deliver strategic value to their schools and, in so doing, achieve their student outcome performance goals.

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# Toward a “Relationship-Based Industry”: Connecting Central Offices and Communities

Mary Sylvia Harrison

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*Engaging parents and the community effectively requires more proactive efforts by district central office leaders.*

**F**or fourteen years, Mary Sylvia Harrison served as president of the College Crusade [formerly the Children’s Crusade] of Rhode Island, an organization that provides mentorships, college-readiness programs, and scholarships for low-income students from grade six through high school. For six of those years, the organization worked closely with the Providence School Department as the lead partner in a major high school redesign initiative funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Currently, Harrison is vice president of programs at the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, which in November 2008 helped launch a major initiative to redesign high schools in four New England states.

Harrison spoke with *Voices in Urban Education* editor Robert Rothman about the relationships between school district central offices and the community.

*From your experience, how would you characterize the relationship between district central offices and the community?*

I think that more often than not, the relationship is one where the community is seeking something in response to some displeasure, and the central office, therefore, is in a reactionary mode. That’s my observation in the time that I witnessed [the relationship] as closely as I did, in the case of Providence, Rhode Island. I cannot say that I can comment about the relationship between the central office and the community, other than the close relationship I had for six years in Providence.

More often than not, it’s a reactionary posture on the part of the central office, reacting to some complaint or

concern or need the community states. I did observe that there were attempts, and there are aspects of central office behavior that are more specifically proactive in the nature of outreach, client service – things that are strategies thought of pretty much as communications strategies.

*Did the district have a structure to initiate these, or were they more ad hoc?*

Structure was definitely present in the form of dedicated staff, and maybe that by itself is a positive sign of at least an intention of the central office to be proactive – to the extent that there have been a couple of, or more, full-

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time people staffing a “parent office” or “parent and community involvement office.” In Providence, I believe they combined those two constituencies together in staffing up the services or links to them. So there’s an actual office, and therefore there must be a whole budget – two or more people.

What I know about Providence in recent years is that there obviously is an intention to have a better relationship. I know under [former superintendent] Donnie Evans, customer relations, client satisfaction, was put out there as something to value and attend to. So some of the staff behavior was carrying out strategies pursuant to that. For the last couple of years there have been annual conferences bringing parents together on a host of issues that would help them, to be able to hear more about or be able to discuss with other people, to learn about resources associated with them. I believe those have been received favorably.



There have been attempts to improve communications from the central office to the parents and stakeholder groups in the form of a newsletter going out to parents. That started a few superintendents ago, starting with Superintendent Diana Lam, and I think it’s been maintained. Successors of hers have kept up that practice of [producing] a written quarterly publication to parents.

*Aside from these efforts, you started out by saying that a lot of districts tend to be reactive. Why do you think that’s the case?*

The history of there being a separation between the community and schools and families set up the modus operandi in the central office to behave in more of a siloed fashion than one would think makes sense for this industry. But with the mandates that have come down, either through state regulation or federal regulation – in the case of Rhode Island, it’s School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT), and No Child Left Behind at the federal level – stating clear expectations for districts to have relationships across school and community lines, across school and family lines, there is increased consciousness to do something. But it’s not quite the same as if it’s the central office’s invention on its own.

In other words, there have been a number of things done in response to mandates to get parents at the table, to get community organizations at the table, but they don’t really play out as authentic engagement of those stakeholders. I think the way that they would is if the central offices were initiating those ideas for engaging parents and community members on their own.

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I certainly have sat on many, many committees as a member of the community, where it felt it was more like people going through the motions and not really knowing fully why or what value could be gained by my presence at the table.

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I certainly have sat on many, many committees as a member of the community, as a leader of a community organization, as well as being a parent of a public school student in Providence, where it felt it was more like people going through the motions and not really knowing fully why or what value could be gained by my presence at the table.

### ***Envisioning the Ideal Relationship***

*Ideally, how would the relationship work? How would a central office be structured to fully engage parents and community members?*

That is something that a community would have to decide and therefore I think a conversation started and opened up by the central office with the community around what the common interests are between the community and the central office of

the school district would give way toward identifying common territory for collaboration. Without a predicate understanding of why people should be working together or talking with one another or validating one another, you really have people just going through motions as opposed to having the buy-in that's generated by that basic understanding.

*So would each community be unique, based on the community conditions?*

Absolutely. The community conditions would drive the nature of the central office relationship. For one thing, I don't think if you asked community people, between schools and the central office, what is their greatest concern – I think you'd find they're most concerned about schools being good for kids. The central office is inconsequential, except to the extent that community is being given good schools for their children.

Building an understanding in a particular community of why the central office is needed, what it does, would help the community to formulate the understanding they need for setting up reasonable expectations for

that central office. I don't think the average person really understands why a central office is needed. I'm not an average person, per se, as education goes; I'm not an educator, but I have worked in this field for twenty years. I do have a pretty good understanding of why a central office is needed. At the same time, I feel very strongly that we have an overblown idea these days of why we should have a central office. I think it's time for us to reexamine the need for a central office in the current paradigm of education.

I think, basically, the ideal central office is one that only exists because it is perceived by those whom it serves as needed, helpful, and value-added. And it's mainly meant to serve schools, as far as I understand. I don't know what research would tell us about the perceptions people in schools have of central office. My observation is that it is not a high opinion. There's something fundamentally wrong. If the only reason for a central office is to be of service to schools, then it would

seem to me that it would be mainly the schools themselves and the students and parents that the schools operate for that would be the barometer of whether the central office is performing a needed, essential, value-added function.

### ***District Leadership Turnover: A Barrier to Effective Relationships***

*What do you see as the obstacles that are keeping central offices from operating more effectively, particularly in relationship to the community?*

One of the real problems, not only as it relates to a community expectation or to the efficacy of a central office these days, is that there is so much transience of leadership in central office functions. Not in the lower-level positions – there seems to be, at least in Providence, a high degree of stability in lower-level positions, and the opposite for higher-level positions. Institutional memory



is absent. So when it comes to getting somewhere – making some progress, with the understanding of why the community has a rightful place in the education conversation, should have a seat at the table of education discussions and decisions – if the leadership that has engaged the community or validated the community as having a rightful place in these things, if that leadership comes and goes, it's like you're always starting something and never getting to second base with it.

As an example, in my twenty years in the community in Providence, operating a nonprofit that provides service to Providence students, supporting the mission it has for its students, being seated at various tables where community input was sought and supposedly with the intent that it be used, I felt many times that we were being asked the same questions, as community members, that we had been asked two years prior, four years, six years, ten years, twelve years prior. We're pretty consistent as community members in showing up and saying the same things about what our concerns are and what our desires are and what our willingness and readiness to help and what our resources are, and not seeing a response of those things actually being manifested in anything.

As far as I can see, that's substantially related to the going and coming of people in leadership positions whose job it is to convene community members or to get community input. Maybe Providence is just a bad example, but it's the only one I can actually speak from. Maybe it's an example of the



worst of the kind of things we're talking about, to the extent that we had so many superintendents in the last six years.

*I don't think that's unique to Providence.*

I'm pretty sure it's not. I know there's a 2.7 year expected tenure of a superintendent. And what's not stated by that fact is that when superintendents leave, so, too, do their high-level administrators in great numbers; and middle-level managers in the central office, who tend to have some degree of stability, get moved around, serving multiple functions, different functions, moved from one job to another, because those jobs themselves change with the new administration. So these people get recycled into different roles.

It's a tragedy how much institutional memory is lost. It's a tragedy, and it's a gross waste of public resources in the limited-resource era that we're in. Even if we had abundant resources, that's just not an efficacious way to run a public operation – or any operation, for that matter.

### ***The Role of Community Organizations***

*What can community organizations, like the one you used to head, do to support central offices more effectively, or promote better relationships between central offices and communities?*

The only reason people in the community have any interest in the central office is because they're interested in the achievement of students. There are entities in the community that have other interests – namely seeing to it that there are fair employment practices or suitable hiring practices or promotional practices – those in the community whose missions are to be

watchful of such things. For the most part, people and community organizations really only care about whether the students in that community are getting a good education.

I don't think people in the community understand the connection between the central office and how our kids are learning. I think there's a lot of work to be done to justify the central office relative to raising student achievement and making it possible for teachers to thrive in their craft and be supported and grow and be held accountable. I don't think that there's a clear understanding in the community or an appreciation of how much of that is needed and how they can be helpful to it.

In the central office, that's the kind of stuff where there's not a lot of interest in community engagement around.

*Do the organizations themselves have a role in that education process?*

Yes. School board affairs is where I see a role for the community along those lines. The policies of the school board



around delivering a quality education – and doing so in a way where there’s demonstrable evidence that there’s regular, incremental progress in raising student achievement, through the practices at central office and school levels – is really where there’s an important community role. Because if your policies are not right, and the policy-making body is accountable for the execution of those mandates and those policies in school practice and in central office practice, then the policy-makers themselves are not doing their jobs.

There’s a lot more that needs to be done to understand board role vis-à-vis central office role vis-à-vis accountability to the community. For example, in Rhode Island, there’s an expectation that every year there be thoughtful consideration of the annual plan for how a district will raise its students’ achievement. There’s an expectation that the community be engaged in that process, in understanding the place the district is in and what it needs to move toward, and in understanding at a school-by-school level what those nuances are. There’s an expectation of community input in agreeing to strategies – not things that are purely instructional. The community is supposed to be well informed on these matters and have a seat at the table that decides what to do about these things. I think there’s really poor performance against those expectations, maybe in Rhode Island overall but certainly in Providence.

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The idea itself makes a great deal of sense, but I’ll point to it as an example of a mandate – why it exists isn’t appreciated among those who have to implement it.

Communities can play very important roles. In the absence of a community role, you have a weaker education strategy. For one thing, communities tend to have distinct personalities, cultural proclivities, norms, and values, which, even if they do not get together and articulate these and agree and vote on them as a community, nonetheless exist. And the same is true of individual schools and individual districts: they tend to have their own cultural norms, practices, and proclivities. If there’s never a consideration of how similar or different these norms, proclivities, values, and cultural practices are across schools, central office, and communi-

ties, then you should fully expect that there'd be conflict between these different segments.

To put it positively, I think the more authentic outreach that a district makes to try to identify what the common interests are across schools and the community, and what can be done to try to break down barriers that prevent people from having meetings of the mind about how their common interests will be worked on in collaborative ways, the more you can maximize the use of the community as an asset and the family as an asset. Or, conversely, you set yourself up – by having such open conversations and making authentic plans – to build relationships that an education system ought to have in order to develop and educate its children and prepare them to be adults. Education, to the extent it's about kids, and because development is all about effective and positive relationships, needs to be a relationship-based industry more than it is these days.



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