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Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement

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The Study of Leadership for Learning Improvement

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

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

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

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

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

Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools

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

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

Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement

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Executive Summary

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

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

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

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

- *Engages the entire central office in reform*. Some central office change strategies demand that certain departments, such as those focused on curriculum and instruction, work with schools in new ways. By contrast, central office transformation involves remaking how all central office administrators work with schools and with each other—everyone from the entire central office, no matter what department, unit, or function, participates in the transformation.

- *Calls on central office administrators to fundamentally remake their work practices and their relationships with schools to support teaching and learning improvements for all schools*. School district central offices routinely attempt to reform themselves by restructuring formal reporting relationships within central office hierarchies, adding or removing units, or revising their standard operating procedures. While structural changes can be helpful, a transformation strategy is fundamentally about remaking what the people in central offices do—their daily work and relationships with schools.

- *Constitutes an important focus for reform in its own right*. Some districts aim to remake central office work practices and relationships with schools in service of implementing a particular program or initiative. For example, as part of new small autonomous schools initiatives in some districts, central office administrators aimed to change the relationship between the central office and schools participating in that specific reform effort (Honig, 2009a). Portfolio management reforms seem headed in a similar direction (Honig & Dearmond, forthcoming). By contrast, districts engaged in central office transformation are working to change their central offices regardless of the particular programs or initiatives in which they may be participating at a given time. Central office transformation involves ongoing work on central office practice that supports teaching and learning improvement and that transcends particular programs or initiatives.

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

The Five Dimensions of Central Office Transformation

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

The Five Dimensions of Central Office Transformation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dimension 4: Stewardship of the Overall Central Office Transformation Process

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- ***Understand the need for everyone in the central office to orient their work in meaningful ways toward supporting the development of schools' capacity for high quality teaching and expanding students' opportunities to learn.*** This orientation toward teaching and learning throughout the central office moves far beyond rhetoric, to include real and meaningful changes in how people in central offices work, consistent with the five dimensions of practice the study findings revealed.

- ***Understand that what fundamentally distinguishes this transformation strategy as a reform is its unrelenting focus on central office administrators' engagement in leadership*** practices ***that support improvements in teaching and learning in schools.*** If the practice doesn't change, it isn't central office transformation.

- ***Grasp how essential it is to build the capacity of people throughout district initiatives in the implementation of central office transformation.*** Deep, sustainable changes in practice, furthermore, are not likely to occur spontaneously, or without concentrated attention to building capacity.

- ***Understand the centrality of leaders taking a continuous improvement approach to their work in the process of central office transformation.*** Given that these are new ways of working, the importance of people "learning their way into the work" as it unfolded cannot be overemphasized.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 1

The Central Office in District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement: The Importance of Transformation

In a southern school district, the superintendent has declared the school district central office "broken" when it comes to supporting teaching and learning in schools and called for fundamental central office reform. Main pillars of the central office reform effort include adding and removing some central office units, reconstituting the superintendents' leadership team, and shifting some reporting lines within the central office to centralize control in the superintendent and leadership team.

Leaders in another district have come to a similar conclusion about the dismal performance of their central office. In response, they have cut central office staff positions and have increased school autonomy over budget decisions.

And in a third, the central office has begun an effort to improve their support for district-wide teaching and learning improvement in part by increasing central office monitoring of alignment between schools and central office of efforts to improve teaching and learning. Such monitoring includes changing how school and district goals, curriculum, and assessments are aligned with central office priorities and decisions.

Are these leaders engaged in central office support for district-wide teaching and learning improvement getting the problem right? Yes and no.

Leaders in these systems have rightly recognized that central offices matter substantially to district-wide teaching and learning improvement. Decades of experience and research show that when central office staff do not exercise central leadership in teaching and learning improvement efforts, such initiatives at best produce improvements at a small handful of schools but hardly district-wide or in a sustainable way. So these leaders are on the right track in their recognition of the roles central leadership can play in district-wide teaching and learning improvement. Various guides and reports on school district central offices highlight the importance of organizational restructuring (such as the additional or removal of units and the shifting of reporting lines), shrinking or streamlining of central office staff, and aligning formal central office and school goals and strategies to district-wide teaching and learning improvement efforts.

But experience and research also show that, despite their popularity, such structural reforms alone generally have not been sufficient for district-wide teaching and learning improvements. For example, the experience of the high-profile district-wide reform in San Diego City Schools in the 1990s revealed, in part, that such restructuring, reallocation, and realignment at the central office level did help with the implementation of reform efforts at the school level. But deep changes in teaching and learning district wide did not materialize, in part, because the reform effort did not adequately support fundamental shifts in what people in central offices knew and could do (Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein 2006). These lessons reflect that ***high-performance depends not only on formal structures but also fundamentally on the practice of people—how central office administrators understand and go about their work day-to-day in leading for teaching and learning improvement.***

Over the past several years, a small number of urban school district central offices have heeded these lessons about the importance of central office leadership practice. Leaders in these districts have aimed to substantially improve teaching and learning district-wide by radically shifting how central office staff work in ways that hold great promise for realizing such results. These efforts, which we call "central office transformation," do not rely on typical organizational restructuring routes, but instead involve fundamental changes in what central office administrators do day-to-day and their relationships with schools. Leaders in these districts recognize that improving teaching and learning across a district is a systems problem, demanding engagement of people throughout schools and central offices in coordinated efforts to realize ambitious teaching and learning improvement goals for all students. And they have made substantial investments in fundamentally rethinking how central office administrators participate in such efforts. In so doing, these central offices are in largely uncharted territory and find they must invent new ways of working and relating to schools on the job.

With support from The Wallace Foundation, we conducted a research study of three urban districts engaged in central office transformation as a district-wide teaching and learning improvement strategy. To better understand what such reform strategies involve, we asked: Who participates in central office transformation? What are they doing to increase central office support for teaching and learning improvement? What conditions help or hinder them in the process? We explored these questions with an in-depth comparative case study of Atlanta Public Schools, the Empowerment Schools Organization in the New York City Depart-

ment of Education, and Oakland Unified School District (CA). We grounded our study in two strands of learning theory, and focused data collection and analysis on particular dimensions of central office work that seemed promising for supporting school-level teaching and learning improvements. Our data set includes over 220 interviews, 252 documents, and verbatim notes from over 300 hours of observations, including meetings and shadowing central office administrators as they went about their daily work.

This report summarizes our findings. As we elaborate below, we found that when central offices fundamentally transform themselves in ways associated with strengthening central office supports for teaching and learning improvement in schools, central office administrators engage in five new lines of work that cut across the entire central office. These lines of work, which can be thought of as key dimensions of central office transformation, include:

1. Engagement with school principals in learning-focused partnerships to deepen principals' instructional leadership or their ability to support teaching and learning improvement at their schools.
2. Direct, intentional support to the central office–principal partnerships.
3. Reorganization and reculturing of each central office unit to support teaching and learning improvement.
4. Stewardship of the overall central office transformation process.
5. Use of evidence throughout the central office to support continual improvement of these lines of work.

These five lines of work touch everyone in the central office, not just staff in units assigned to focus on curriculum and instruction for example. ***Through the transformation process, everyone in the central office focuses their work— either directly, or indirectly through supporting their central office colleagues—on strengthening principals' instructional leadership as a key lever for teaching and learning improvement in schools.*** Central office administrators also work directly with other school staff, such as the growing cadre of teacher leaders in the sites we studied and many others who, alongside or separately from the school principal, are exercising instructional leadership in schools.[1] But a hallmark of the transfor-

[1] See a companion study (Portin, Knapp, Dareff, Feldman, Russell, Samuelson, & Yeh, 2009), for a more comprehensive picture of the exercise of instructional leadership by supervisory and nonsupervisory leaders in selected schools

mation efforts across all three systems was an intensive focus on school principals and their relationships with key designated administrators in the central office who created learning-focused partnerships with these school leaders. All other central office administrators reoriented their work not to serving children or schools in general but to advancing the particular work of the new principal–central office administrator partnerships.

Within each of these five dimensions, we identified specific work practices or activities that seemed particularly promising for strengthening principals' instructional leadership. For instance, all the central office administrators involved in the learning-focused partnerships with principals convened these school leaders one-on-one and in networks to support their development as instructional leaders. These relationships provided powerful supports for principals' instructional leadership when, in the one-on-one and network settings, the participating central office administrators modeled instructional leadership for school principals. Other promising practices in those principal relationships included developing and using particular kind of tools and brokering resources in ways that helped principals engage in instructional leadership.

In the remainder of this chapter, we discuss the concerns that motivated our study through a brief review of research on school improvement and the participation of school district central offices in school reform. This research underscores the promise of central office transformation—of remaking what central office administrators do day-to-day and how they relate to schools—for fostering district-wide teaching and learning improvements. Second, we introduce our study sites and provide an overview of the methods and analytic processes used to produce the study. Then, we introduce the five dimensions of central office transformation in greater detail, and set up the deeper exploration of each of these aspects of the work in the latter chapters. In each of the subsequent chapters (2-6) we summarize our findings about these five dimensions. We conclude in Chapter 7 with an initial set of recommendations about central office transformation for the research and practice of educational leadership that aim to strengthen teaching and learning district-wide.

within two of the districts (Atlanta and New York City/Empowerment Schools Organization) engaged in central office transformation efforts.

What We Know from Research and Experience

For decades, efforts to improve teaching and learning in schools generally have not realized their intended results beyond a few pockets of success. While the limitations of school improvement initiatives have various root causes, many agree that district central offices have been key implementation impediments (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow, & Easton, 1998; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990; Ravitch & Viteritti, 1997). For example, the effective schools movement of the 1980s revealed how features of effective schools were difficult to realize within single schools, let alone across multiple schools, when school district central offices did not participate productively in their implementation (e.g., Purkey & Smith, 1985). In the 1990s, reforms to scale-up promising comprehensive or whole-school reform models likewise ran into central office roadblocks that curbed implementation (e.g., Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002). More recently, the implementation of standards-based curricular reform initiatives have been impeded in part by central office administrators' limited understanding of and support for new teaching demands (Spillane, 1998, 2000; Spillane & Thompson, 1997; Stein & Nelson, 2003).

Clearly, teaching and learning improvements at single schools and multiple schools depend not only on what happens in schools but on how school district central offices create and implement supports for change. But what, more specifically, do central offices do when they realize such supports? The field knows far more about how central offices fail to participate productively in district-wide teaching and learning improvement than about what they do when they create conditions that might help to realize desired results. Prescriptions abound describing what central offices should do to improve teaching and learning district-wide, yet virtually none of these prescriptions rest on direct empirical evidence about how central office change might actually have a positive impact on school-level practice.

Such gaps in knowledge are particularly evident in the research on school leadership, which reflects a consensus that essential conditions for improving teaching and learning include school principals who engage in "instructional leadership" (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006; Murphy, 1990; Murphy & Hallinger, 1987, 1988). Accounts of efforts to improve principals' instructional leadership practice suggests this work requires sustained, job-embedded supports (Fink & Resnick, 2001; Hale & Moorman, 2003; Houle, 2006), and that people in district central offices should somehow provide such support (Fullan & Stiegel-

bauer, 1991; Miller, 2004; Whitaker, 1996). What the research does not elaborate with any specificity is what supports are needed or how school district central offices might provide them regularly and at a high level of quality.

This inattention to examining what people in central offices do to support teaching and learning improvement, despite its seemingly obvious importance, stems from several historical and contemporary developments in practice and in research. For instance, federal and state policies for decades have barely recognized school district central offices as a main agent of change, often treating them as administrative pass-throughs for schools (e.g., Marsh, Kerr, Ikemoto, Darilek, Suttorp, & Zimmer, 2005). In fact, central offices were originally established in many city school districts at the turn of the last century to handle basic business functions for what was a rapidly growing number of city schools. When they turned their attention to matters related to teaching and learning, central offices mainly engaged in largely regulatory functions such as ensuring that their teaching staff met standards for licensure (Gamson, 2009a, 2009b). Perhaps not surprisingly, then, in recent years some state and other policymakers have aimed to improve teaching and learning in schools not by investing in school district central offices but by bypassing them, channeling resources into schools and classrooms directly (Busch et al., 2004) or into organizations outside the school district system (Honig, 2009b).

Likewise, for decades, educational researchers studied school district superintendents but paid scant attention to the hundreds of staff in urban central offices whose work is consequential to what such offices actually do and how they relate to schools (Honig, 2008; Spillane, 1998). When researchers have looked beyond superintendents to study the work of other central office administrators they tend to report how "the district" participates in teaching and learning improvement efforts, significantly masking the various people, units, work practices, and other conditions within urban school district central offices that may matter to district-wide teaching and learning improvements (e.g. Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002). Similarly, researchers have focused on districts with upward-trending student achievement data, and concluded simply that whatever the district central office has been doing relates to those positive student outcomes (e.g., Togneri & Anderson, 2003), rather than substantiating what people in the central office did that might have helped achieve the positive outcomes.[2]

[2] The limitations of the research literature are methodological as well. For example, many studies of school district central offices rely on reports by school principals and teachers about what their central offices do. While people who work in schools have important perspectives on their central offices, most central office practice takes place

The experience of some urban school systems is beginning to demonstrate in broad terms what central office leadership for district-wide teaching and learning improvement may require. For one thing, their experience shows that *what central office administrators know and do is consequential for the implementation and success of teaching and learning improvement efforts*. For example, research on the implementation of various school improvement efforts including new small autonomous schools initiatives hinged substantially on how central office administrators thought about and engaged in their work (Honig, 2003, 2004b, 2009a). Many of the most promising central office work practices were non-traditional and outright counter-cultural for some school district central office administrators and required new forms of capacity throughout the central office for taking on and occasionally inventing new work practices (e.g., Honig, 2009a). District-wide teaching and learning improvement efforts in Community School District #2 and the San Diego Schools likewise depended heavily on the ready capacity of central office administrators to engage in new work practices supportive of district-wide teaching and learning improvements (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, & McLaughlin, 2002; Hubbard et al., 2006). There and elsewhere, central office administrators' knowledge of high-quality instruction has been emerging as fundamental to implementing ambitious standards-based curricular reforms (Spillane, 1998, 2000; Spillane & Thompson, 1997; Stein & Nelson, 2003). Research also supports the importance of central office administrators' work by negative example. For example, efforts to achieve district-wide "alignment" of formal goals and strategies fall short in many districts without substantial, increased capacity of central office administrators to change how they work with schools within those formal structures to support school improvement (Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001).

Second, implementation of these reforms hinges substantially on central office administrators engaging *in new partnership relationships with schools and community agencies to build the central offices' and schools' collective capacity for implementation* (Honig, 2004a; Honig, 2009a). The emphasis on partnership relationships moves beyond long-standing debates about whether schools or the

out of principals' and teachers' view, rendering such reports fundamentally limited. Other studies draw on single interviews with a small handful of central office administrators to represent the whole of the central office. While such methods represent an important improvement over previous studies that drew conclusions about the central office based only on superintendent responses to interviews or surveys, one-time interviews with a few central office staff do not necessarily capture what central office administrators across central offices actually do or how their work unfolds over time.

central office should direct educational improvement efforts. Rather, both parties—the central office and schools—possess knowledge and skills essential to expanding students' opportunities to learn. These relationships are fundamentally dynamic (Murphy & Hallinger, 1988, p. 179) and rooted in notions of reciprocal accountability (Fink & Resnick, 2001) where central office administrators do not abdicate their traditional regulatory functions, but rather redefine them so that they operate in service of partnership relationships that help build both school and district capacity for learning improvement.

Researchers have variably called such changes in central office practice "central office administration as learning" (Honig, 2008); a "learning stance" (Gallucci, 2008; Swinnerton, 2006), "inquiry" (Copland, 2003), and "reform as learning" (Hubbard et al., 2006). In so doing, researchers have underscored that central office leadership for teaching and learning demands ongoing learning on the part of central office administrators as well—ongoing learning about the kinds of capacity, work practices, and relationships that might enable demonstrable improvements in teaching and learning.

In sum, ***central offices and the people who work in them are not simply part of the background noise in school improvement. Rather, school district central office administrators can exercise essential leadership, in partnership with school leaders, to build capacity throughout public educational systems for teaching and learning improvements.*** Such leadership requires new capacity, work practices, and relationships throughout central offices. However, a host of forces work against such central office leadership. As noted above, school district central offices have operated for most of their history in ways distinctly different from what efforts to improve teaching and learning across an entire district demand. Accordingly, efforts to engage urban district central office administrators in the kinds of leadership that district-wide teaching and learning improvement demands are akin to trying to reverse the direction of a large ocean liner cruising full-speed ahead. Inertia from long-standing institutional forces coupled with demanding job conditions and limited research-based and empirical guides work against the kinds of fundamental changes that such leadership seems to demand. Adding to the challenge, just as some urban systems have begun to take up the mantle of leadership for district-wide teaching and learning improvement, they are facing severe budget shortfalls (Bach, 2005; Davis, 2008; Garber, 2008; Song, 2009), the threat or reality of state takeover (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Goertz & Duffy, 2003; Katz, 2003), and desegregation and special education decrees that focus more on compliance

with external mandates than on learning support (Boghossian, 2005; Chute, 2007; Haynes, 2007).

A handful of urban districts are working through these challenges and heeding the emerging lessons about the importance of central office leadership to district-wide teaching and learning improvements. Efforts in these districts reflect the recognition that meaningful and productive central office engagement in district-wide teaching and learning improvement is a far cry from central-office-administration-as-usual and represents a distinct reform approach in these ways:

- The *reform effort focuses centrally and meaningfully on teaching and learning improvement*. Other reforms aim to increase the efficiency with which the central office provides basic services to schools. Many central office leaders say that they work in service of teaching and learning. Transformed central offices, by contrast, are able to demonstrate how their work matters in concrete terms to teaching and learning improvement. What is more, they put their work where their mouth is and actually change their work to leverage specific supports for teaching and learning improvement.

- *The* **entire** *district central office engages in reform*. Some change strategies demand that certain central office departments work with schools in new ways (Honig, 2006, 2009a). By contrast, central office transformation involves remaking how all central office administrators work with schools. Accordingly, reform participants are not just those people working on curriculum and instruction or professional development, but rather include everyone from the entire central office, no matter what department, unit, or function.

- *Central office administrators' fundamentally remake their* **work practices** *and their* **relationships with schools** *in support of teaching and learning improvements for all students*. School district central offices routinely reform themselves by restructuring formal reporting relationships within central office hierarchies, adding and removing units, or revising their standard operating procedures. While structural changes can be helpful, participation in district-wide teaching and learning improvements is fundamentally about remaking what the people in central offices do—their daily work and relationships with schools.

- *Central office transformation is an important focus for reform in its own right*. Some districts aim to remake central office work practices and relationships with schools in service of implementing a particular program or initiative. For

example, as part of new small autonomous schools initiatives in some districts, central office administrators aimed to change the relationship between the central office and schools participating in that specific reform effort (Honig, 2009a). Portfolio management reforms seem headed in a similar direction (Honig & DeArmond, forthcoming). By contrast, districts engaged in central office transformation are working to change their central offices regardless of the particular programs or initiatives in which they may be participating at a given time. These transformation efforts involve ongoing work on central office practice that supports teaching and learning improvement that transcends particular programs or initiatives.

This conception of central office transformation is not just another rehash of old efforts at "restructuring" the district organizational chart or a top-down or bottom up approach to change. Rather, central office transformation is a system wide reform strategy that calls for changes in leadership practice at school and central office levels. And, while these ideas on paper may appear commonsensical to some, they are also extremely ambitious to realize in practice.

The Study and Study Sites

Given the promise of central office transformation and the centrality of central office administrators' work practice to their design and likely success, we set out to understand how central office administrators participated in these efforts. With this focus we intended not to downplay the importance of formal structures such as new organizational charts to the performance of central offices but rather shine a concentrated light on central office practices and activities.

We conducted our research in Atlanta Public Schools (GA), New York City/Empowerment Schools Organization (NYC/ESO),[3] and Oakland Unified School District (CA). Each of these districts was in the process of implementing a major central office reform initiative that fit our definition of central office transforma-

[3] As explained in the Capsule Descriptions, as part of their overall central office transformation process, the New York City Department of Education radically remade its central office into distinct School Support Organizations (SSOs), each of which functioned as the "central office" for schools that chose to affiliate with it. Since it was not feasible for us to study all 14 SSOs, particularly given our emphasis on understanding the work practices of central office administrators across the central office, we chose to focus on the Empowerment School Organization (ESO). All 14 SSOs were charged with raising student achievement, but the ESO, at the start of our study, seemed particularly focused on strengthening the day-to-day work practices of central office administrators to support schools' capacity for improved teaching and learning.

tion in its emphasis on changing the work of all central office administrators to focus on teaching and learning improvement. We identified many other systems that had major teaching and learning improvement efforts underway but not efforts that called for coordinated changes in every central office administrators' practice as an integral reform strand. For example, some districts were engaged in changing the work of central office administrators within single central office departments but were not yet engaged in central-office-wide changes in central office administrators' work. While other school systems may have been engaged in central office transformation, the work of Atlanta, New York, and Oakland was particularly visible to us in part because of our prior research projects in New York and Oakland, and, in the case of Atlanta and New York City, because of our participation in a national network of state and district educational leaders convened by our funder, The Wallace Foundation.

In selecting sites, we also assumed that all three systems were operating with important experience-based knowledge about what central office transformation might involve and how to go about it. All three systems, prior to our study period, had been involved in a substantial effort to pilot the implementation of ideas that later came to ground the overall design of their central office transformation effort. We assumed that these prior experiences indicated that each system had established a base of support within the central office for transformation and a set of lessons about what such change processes might involve and how to support them.

Similarly, all three districts had made substantial financial and political investments in central office transformation, suggesting that they had an adequate base of support for implementation and that they would not run into the predictable implementation barriers of limited financial and political resources. For example, district leaders in each system appeared in the local and national media as avid, public sponsors of the work. Two of the districts worked closely with at least one outside organization to increase their capacity for implementation (Honig, 2004a, b). Among these organizations were private foundations that invested millions of dollars in discretionary funds in each district to support the central office transformation process.

In selecting sites, we did not look for cases of successful central office transformation. After all, central office transformation efforts are extremely complex and present various challenges of attributing central office changes to school-level

improvements. Given the nascent stage of research in this area, we instead set out to find districts that promised to help us see what central offices do when they aim to shift their work practices, central-office-wide, to focus meaningfully on teaching and learning improvement. Research in such sites lays important groundwork for future studies that may subsequently explore the relationships between particular practices and activities in central offices and teaching and learning in schools.

Though we did not set out to attribute school-level changes to central office work, all three systems at the start of our study and throughout our study period posted gains in student achievement along various measures (see Methodological Appendix for a review of this evidence). District leaders attributed those successes, in part, to their central office change efforts. These data, along with the local attribution of gains to central office work, suggest that these system-level reform efforts were worth examining as a possible reason for achievement gains.

The three districts also offered important opportunities for contrasting how different conditions might matter for implementation. For example, our districts varied substantially in size with the NYC/ESO serving a student population 200,000 students larger than our other districts. Our districts also varied in total operating budget, with Oakland's budget topping off at less than half that of Atlanta despite a comparable number of students. Oakland, like other California school districts, also struggled during our study period with extreme state budget cuts. Additionally, our districts had been engaged in central office transformation for different lengths of time. For example, Atlanta's central office transformation effort began nine years prior to the start of our data collection with the hiring of Dr. Beverly Hall as superintendent. By contrast, the other two districts were each only a year or two into the central office transformation process at the start of data collection. Each district followed a different path into central office transformation, as described in the Capsule Descriptions on the next page.

Capsule Descriptions:

Launching Central Office Transformation in Three Urban School Districts

Atlanta Public Schools

The original designers of the central office transformation initiative in Atlanta describe the initiative as a moral imperative for a central office that, in essence, had avoided dealing with the plight of the poorest, least powerful children in the school system. As Superintendent Beverly Hall reported when she assumed the role of superintendent in 1999, "The system was in crisis. I was the fifth superintendent in 10 years, and so the central office reflected the total disarray that existed in the organization. There were clearly people there who were working really hard, but they were not sure of the vision, they were not sure of the direction, and they were almost sitting back and saying, 'This, too, shall pass'" (Atlanta Public Schools, 2009, n.p.). Dr. Hall described how central office practices were far removed from immediate contact with schools and not necessarily focused on the kinds of work practices that promised to improve teaching and learning, especially in Atlanta's mostly African-American and low-income neighborhoods. Hall's approach to change stemmed from her view that improving the central office meant fundamental change—changes in the core beliefs of those working in the central office and schools about what was possible for student achievement.

Hall's initial efforts focused on enlisting the support of an external support provider that she then used to inform broader changes in the central office. Specifically, Hall positioned Project Grad, a national reform organization, to provide support for ten of the district's lowest performing schools. In that capacity, Project GRAD staff brokered relationships between schools and other vendors that supported schools in implementing improvement strategies, including intensive coaching. The district central office also deployed its own coaches to those schools to provide mostly job-embedded professional development to teachers and principals.

Subsequently, several developments converged to fuel the process of central office transformation. For one, Project GRAD schools posted significant and rapid initial improvement in teaching and learning. For example, fourth grade student reading scores in the first cohort of elementary schools increased by an average of 35 percentage points from 2000 to 2003 on Georgia state test scores.[1] In tandem, Project GRAD received an infusion of resources from the district and private foundations for deepening its partnership with the district. Project GRAD leaders worked in concert with central office administrators to fundamentally rethink how the central office worked with all Atlanta schools. By the start of our research project in 2007–2008, all central office staff had been engaged in various strategic efforts to remake their work practices and relationships with schools to improve teaching and learning district-wide.

New York City Empowerment Schools Organization

The central office transformation efforts in New York City also began with a pilot effort, in this case called the Autonomy Zone. Under the sponsorship of Chancellor Joel Klein, the Autonomy Zone involved 30 schools across the city in piloting a new set of relationships with a subset of central office

[1] Atlanta Project GRAD, Annual Report 2002–2003.

staff specifically dedicated to supporting teaching and learning improvement at those schools. As part of the pilot, participating schools received more autonomy and an increase in discretionary resources in return for improved results. According to Eric Nadelstern, primary initial architect and director, the Autonomy Zone aimed, to "put control in the school [and] remove any excuses for why the school is failing." Central office administrators, in turn, focused on building the capacity of participating school principals to drive instructional improvement at their schools.

In tandem with the growth of the Autonomy Zone, Chancellor Klein and New York City's Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who had overall control over the New York City Department of Education, became outspoken critics of the organization of the district's administrative system that deployed central office staff throughout the city in geographically-based "regional" offices. These two leaders and other critics argued that, despite their physical proximity to schools, the regional offices worked with schools in primarily supervisory and distant ways not powerfully focused on learning improvement nor responsive to the diverse needs of individual schools. As Nadelstern explained, "I believe in the power of differentiation as the underpinning of the entire reform strategy. When the Chancellor talks about 400 successful schools, he doesn't presume they will be successful in the same way."

Concerns with the geographically based central office structure, coupled with the perceived success of the Autonomy Zone and its subsequent expansion into an "Empowerment Schools" arrangement (comprising more than 300 schools), fueled and informed the January 2007 decision by Chancellor Klein to dismantle the entire central office regional structure and most of the centrally located district offices and replace them with 14 School Support Organizations (SSOs). The Empowerment Schools Organization replaced the expanded form of the Autonomy Zone. The system required all schools to select one of the SSOs that would essentially serve as its central office—but a transformed central office that focused on supporting teaching and learning improvement at all schools served by this SSO.[2] Chancellor Klein described the new systems design, in a 2007 letter to principals, stating,

> When you choose a School Support Organization [SSO], you and your school community have the chance to select the team that is best suited to help you, your staff, and your students succeed. All of the School Support Organizations are designing their offerings to support your efforts to meet student performance goals. The services they offer will include coaching, guidance and instructional support for students with special needs, help in using the accountability tools, professional development, and many other dimensions of support that relate to your educational mission on a daily basis.

Oakland Unified School District

Many trace the emergence of Oakland's central office transformation effort in part to the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES), an external school support provider. As part of its efforts, BayCES helped the central office and community launch new small autonomous schools but also began to conceptualize a new central office to support the transformation of all Oakland public schools

[2] Under the new design, business services continued to operate in geographically-based regional offices called Integrated Services Centers (ISCs) serving all schools in their parts of the city regardless of a school's chosen SSO. However, as part of central office transformation, ISCs were an attempt to significantly improve the quality of services provided to school staff as part of the overall emphasis on focusing school staff on improving teaching and learning, not mainly operational issues.

into new small autonomous schools. Whereas the then-current district central office weathered routine criticism for its inefficiencies and lack of attention to high-quality teaching and learning, the new central office would be entirely oriented toward working with individual schools to help build capacity for improving learning and, through a new budget structure, more equitably distribute resources across the district to support such outcomes for all students. Steve Jubb, then Executive Director of BayCES, envisioned piloting the new central office with a cadre of staff outside the current system and then taking the pilot to scale throughout the central office. Other external organizations, such as the Oakland Cross-city Campaign for Urban School Reform,and local foundations brought in various experts such as the superintendent of the Edmonton School District (Alberta, Canada), known for central office change, to inform the process (Honig, 2009).

When the Oakland district fell under state receivership in 2003, BayCES, the Oakland Cross-city Campaign, and others successfully argued that the school district should continue the new small autonomous schools initiative but also engage in central office redesign—not as a pilot, but as a major district initiative. Steve Jubb and other BayCES staff members subsequently took on formal positions temporarily within the central office to further design and implement central office transformation effort. The district formally launched its central office transformation effort in 2005-2006 under the banner, Expect Success. As one central office leader described the initiative,

> … every employee, I hope at the end of this, has that mentality that everybody is responsible for teaching and learning. That's why we [the central office] exist. That's our core function. And so the responsibility of the central office is to make sure that you're supporting that mission or that core function of what we do. And so you're finding ways to improve your current job to make it easier on teachers and principals to focus on students.

We conducted an in-depth comparative qualitative case study of these three districts, primarily during the 2007–2008 academic year.[4] We chose data sources that allowed us to probe deeply into central office administrators' work practices and relationships with schools, to triangulate findings across multiple sources (to increase the validity of our findings), and to take advantage of special opportunities for data collection in each district. Table 1 summarizes our data collection methods, which we briefly elaborate in the Methodological Appendix.

Highlights of our methodological approach include heavy reliance on observations of central office administrators' engagement in reform activities. For example, in Atlanta we shadowed certain central office administrators as they worked with school principals. In Oakland and New York City we observed formal meetings convened specifically to support central office administrators in shifting their roles to focus more centrally than they had in the past on teaching and learning

[4] Our data collection in New York City began in the spring of 2007.

improvement. We triangulated our observations with interviews designed to probe for concrete examples and documents that demonstrated how central office administrators engaged in their work. With this and related strategies, our interviews moved beyond simply asking central office administrators to tell us about their work and focused on surfacing specific evidence such as examples and documentation to substantiate such self-reports. When central office administrators said they engaged in particular practices or activities, or that their principals achieved certain outcomes, we used those examples in subsequent interviews with principals to probe for evidence that might confirm or negate such self-reports. Similarly, we intentionally sought to corroborate reports from school principals with reports from central office administrators. We also interviewed a core set of central office administrators at the start, middle, and end of our data collection period to understand how their work may have varied over an academic year.

Table 1: Data Sources

Type	Atlanta Public Schools	New York City Department of Education	Oakland Unified School District	Total
Observation Hours	45	93	124.5	264.5
Interviews	Individual Respondents=47 Total Interviews=110 43 Central Office 6 Principals 2 Other Interviewed 1–3x	Individual Respondents=63 Total Interviews=99 40 Central Office 18 Principals 5 Other Interviewed 1–4x	Individual Respondents=48 Total Interviews=63 25 Total Central Office 16 Principals 7 Other Interviewed 1–4x	162 Respondents 282 Interviews
Documents	44	60	148	252

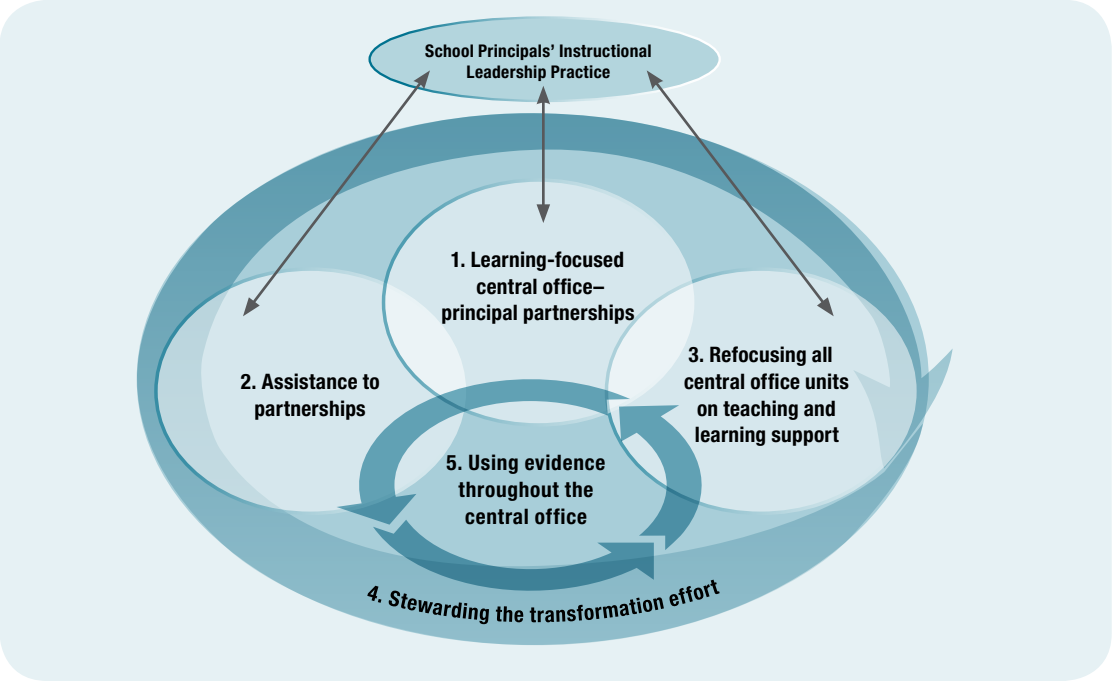
Our data analysis proceeded in several phases over more than a year and a half, during which time research team members scrutinized all data for patterns consistent with our conceptual framework and across districts. As described in more detail in the Methodological Appendix, we counted as "findings" only those examples and patterns we could corroborate with at least three different sources of data such as interviews with different respondents and interview, observation, and document data. Our findings reflect patterns of work practices and activities across all three

systems that we derived from multiple data sources, and we found it challenging to present our data concisely. In the presentation of findings in this report, we rely on interview data to briefly illustrate key points and summaries of our observations but reinforce here that all findings rest on a substantial set of corroborating evidence.

The Five Dimensions of Central Office Transformation

Our study findings reveal what people throughout these three districts were doing to change their work to focus substantively on supporting teaching and learning improvement in schools district-wide. We organized our analysis into five distinct aspects of this work that we call the Five Dimensions of Central Office Transformation. These dimensions represent a set of tenable hypotheses concerning the kinds of central office work practices and activities that seem to matter in strengthening schools' capacity for teaching and learning improvement (in the case of Dimension 1) or in focusing central office administrators' daily work on teaching and learning improvement in substantive ways. We present those findings in the balance of the report and display them schematically in Figure 1 below, along with a brief explanation of how we established their connection to strengthening principals' instructional leadership.

Figure 1. The Five Dimensions of Central Office Transformation



Dimension 1: Learning-focused Partnerships between the Central Office and Principals

In each district a dedicated cadre of central office administrators worked directly with school principals to strengthen principals' instructional leadership; their work practices constitute the first dimension of central office transformation. We call these central office administrators, collectively, Instructional Leadership Directors or ILDs. ILDs all worked with school principals individually and through networks or professional learning communities. Despite those similarities, how they worked with individual principals and principal networks varied in ways that we associated with different results. We distinguished among ILD work practices that would be more and less likely to improve principal's instructional leadership (and ultimately teaching and learning) using the following steps (a more detailed discussion appears in the Methodological Appendix).

First, we identified central office activities that reflected or conflicted with findings from research on learning about how to improve people's professional practice. Various strands of research on how people learn indicate that when people (such as the ILDs) assist others (such as school staff) in improving their own practice, their assistance involves specific kinds of work practices such as modeling and the development and use of particular kinds of tools. Because these practices have been well established across disciplines, research settings, and research studies, they offer a research-based consensus regarding the kinds of "high quality" assistance relationships that are likely to help professionals improve their practice (for a summary of the features of high-quality assistance relationships, see Honig, 2008). In adapted form, they offered a template for examining ILDs' work practices in their attempts to help principals. When applied to the substantial body of data we accumulated about ILDs' work in these three districts, the template captured much of what the ILDs did, and particular types of practices emerged as having the potential for positive impacts on principals' instructional leadership, while the absence of these practices (or negative examples of them) showed potential for the opposite effect.

We then corroborated the likelihood that these practices would—and did—strengthen principals' instructional leadership with interview data and observations from four sources:

- (1) reports from school principals (in interviews and also district feedback surveys) regarding the extent to which the ILDs helped them improve their instructional leadership practice;

- (2) our observations of the principals deepening their engagement in instructional leadership;
- (3) reports from other central office administrators regarding their perceptions of the effectiveness of the ILDs in supporting school principals' instructional leadership; and
- (4) the ILDs' own reports about their effectiveness in strengthening principals' instructional leadership.

These data support the following pattern: ***ILDs who most frequently engaged in "high quality" assistance practices, as established by research, were also those that principals, other central office administrators, and independent observations unanimously identified as having a positive impact on their instructional leadership practice.*** While our research design did not allow us to causally attribute improved principals' instructional leadership (or beyond that, specific improvements in teaching and learning) to what ILDs did, our findings strongly suggest that specific ILD practices were highly likely to help principals improve their instructional leadership practice.

These "high quality" practices for strengthening principals' instructional leadership include:

- *Differentiating supports* for principals' instructional leadership consistently over the entire academic year.
- *Modeling ways of thinking and acting* that exhibit the exercise of effective instructional leadership practice.
- *Developing and using tools* that helped principals engage in instructional leadership practices.
- *Serving as a broker between principals and external resources,* by bridging/connecting principals to sources of assistance, and buffering them from negative external influences, both in service of supporting principals' instructional leadership.

Additionally, in the principal networks, promising practices also included:

- *Engaging all principals as resources to their peers in support of each others' instructional leadership* (e.g., principals in other schools within their networks).

Dimension 2: Assistance to the Central Office–Principal Partnerships by the Rest of the Central Office

We found that in each district other central office administrators positioned themselves to provide direct support to the ILDs. In this second dimension of central office transformation, we distinguish activities of those other central office administrators that are more or less likely to support ILDs' work. We defined positive ILD-support activities as those that *helped ILDs maximize the time they spent working directly with their school principals*, either individually or in networks, and focused on improving principals' instructional leadership practice. We based our assessments of ILDs' time on:

- a random sample of their calendars, reviewed as part of interviews three times over the course of the study period, to determine time spent (if any) by other central office staff in supporting their work;
- reports from ILDs about the impacts of different support activities on their time; and
- reports from school principals about the amount and nature of the time they spent with ILDs, either in person or on the phone or e-mail.

We associated the following activities by other central office administrators with increasing the time ILDs spent supporting principals' instructional leadership:

- *Professional development for ILDs* that provided them with regular opportunities for challenging conversations about the quality of their work with school principals and how to improve it.
- *Taking issues and other demands off ILDs' plates*, freeing up their time to work with principals on principals' instructional leadership.
- *Leading through—rather than around—the ILDs*, and otherwise supporting the leadership of ILDs, vis-à-vis principals' instructional leadership.
- *Developing and using an accountability system* in which ILDs did not act as the sole agents holding principals accountable for improvements in student performance.

Dimension 3: Reorganizing and Reculturing Other Central Office Units, to Support Teaching and Learning Improvement

The reorganization and reculturing of staff in all central office units—from curriculum and instruction to facilities—in support of teaching and learning improvement constitutes a third dimension of central office transformation. What reorganizing and reculturing involved varied to some degree across different central office units, and we were unable to capture all the details and differences across all units within each central office.[5] However, particular activities seemed promising for focusing the work of the rest of the central office on teaching and learning improvement. We base our claims related to this aspect of central office transformation, first, on multiple interviews with different central office administrators about the nature of their reform activities, drawing conclusions only if we could corroborate different claims with the reports of three different respondents. We considered those activities to be potentially focused on teaching and learning if central office administrators could provide an explicit rationale or explanation for why specific reorganization and reculturing activities mattered to teaching and learning improvement in schools or if they demonstrated that the reorganizing and reculturing activities had actually resulted in additional teaching and learning resources in schools (such as freeing up principals' time for instructional leadership).

Across all three systems, three kinds of reorganizing and reculturing activities exhibit clear potential for furthering the improvement of teaching and learning in schools, and specifically for the work of school principals as instructional leaders, directly or indirectly:

- *Shifting the practice of central office administrators across central office units* to personalize services to schools through "case management" and to focus on problem-solving through "project management."
- *Developing the capacity of people throughout the central office* to support teaching and learning improvement.

[5] A coordinated companion study (Plecki, Knapp, Castaneda, Halverson, LaSota, & Lochmiller, 2009), sheds further light on the "reorganization" alluded to here. That study examined the reallocation of staffing resources in two of the three districts studied here (Atlanta and New York City/Empowerment Schools Organization), and documented various district-level leadership actions, among them the investment of staffing and other resources, that made it possible, or more likely, that central office staff would engage in the practices under study here.

- *Holding central office administrators accountable for high-quality performance*, especially as it relates to the quality of support provided to school leaders.

Dimension 4: Stewardship of the Overall Central Office Transformation Process

The implementation of central office transformation requires explicit "stewardship" or intentional efforts to develop and support the overall transformation effort. This fourth dimension of central office transformation distinguishes specific stewardship practices that were more and less likely to foster the central office transformation effort. We again triangulated observations and self-reports and inductively narrowed down a set of activities that we and our respondents consistently identified as supportive of their efforts to improve teaching and learning. In sum, we found that stewardship entailed:

- *Ongoing development of a theory of action* for central office transformation.
- *Communication with others to help them understand the theory of action*, including strategies used and underlying rationale for these strategies.
- *Strategic brokering of external resources and relationships* to support the overall central office transformation process.

Dimension 5: Use of Evidence throughout the Central Office

We also found that each one of the first four dimensions of central office transformation involved staff collecting and using evidence to inform how they went about their support for school principals (Dimension 1), support to ILDs (Dimension 2), reorganizing and reculturing of central office units (Dimension 3), and stewardship (Dimension 4). These activities meant that administrators throughout the central office collected evidence not just from student performance systems but from the experience of central office administrators in the transformation process, and tried to use that evidence to inform their participation in the other four dimensions of the central office transformation process.

We based our claims about these activities mainly on observations of central office meetings as well as documents, corroborated by interviews. Our insights into the important roles these activities play in central office transformation are further supported by research on organizational learning that shows how the collection and use of information from experience can help organizations realize their goals

(see Methodological Appendix). In addition, observations and interviews in each site demonstrated how integral such collection and use of evidence was to the implementation of the other dimensions of central office transformation.

Table 2. The Five Dimensions of Central Office Transformation

Five Dimensions	Specific Practices
1. Learning-focused partnerships with school principals to deepen principals' instructional leadership practice	Dedicated central office administrators (Instructional Leadership Directors or ILDs) engage principals one-on-one and in networks or learning communities around principals' instructional leadership. Specific practices in these relationships include: • *Differentiating supports* for principals' instructional leadership consistently over the entire academic year • *Modeling instructional leadership thinking and action* • *Developing and using tools* to support principals' engagement in instructional leadership • *Brokering external resources* to help principals focus on their instructional leadership • *Engaging all principals as resources on instructional leadership* to help their peers (e.g., in principal networks)
2. Assistance to the central office–principal partnerships	• *Professional development for ILDs* that provided them with regular opportunities for challenging conversations about the quality of their work with school principals and how to improve it • *Taking issues and other demands off ILDs' plates*, freeing up their time to work with principals on principals' instructional leadership • *Leading through—rather than around—the ILDs*, and otherwise supporting the leadership of ILDs, vis-à-vis principals' instructional leadership • *Developing and using an accountability system* in which ILDs did not act as the sole agents holding principals accountable for improvements in student performance
3. Reorganizing and reculturing of other central office units to support teaching and learning improvement	• *Shifting the practice of central office administrators across central office units* to personalize services to principals through "case management" and focus on problem-solving through "project management" • *Developing the capacity of people throughout the central office* to support teaching and learning improvement • *Holding central office administrators accountable* for high-quality performance that supported school leaders
4. Stewardship of the overall central office transformation process	• *Ongoing development of the theory of action for central office transformation* • *Ongoing communication about the work of central office transformation* and its underlying theory of action • *Strategic brokering of external resources and relationships* to support the overall central office transformation process
5. Evidence use throughout the central office to support continual improvement of work practices and relationships with schools	• *Ongoing intentional search for various forms of information,* especially evidence from central office administrators' experience, about how to support teaching and learning improvement • *Deliberate efforts to incorporate that information into central office policies and practices.*

How the Five Dimensions Work Together to Support Principals' Instructional Leadership

As these five dimensions suggest, central office transformation involves everyone in the central office focusing their work on supporting principals' instructional leadership as a main avenue for building schools' capacity for teaching and learning improvement. To be sure, not all of the attention and energy of a transformed central office is focused on principals' work alone. Through various other programs and initiatives, central office administrators worked directly with classroom teachers and staff, and many school principals shared responsibility for exercising instructional leadership with teachers and instructional leadership teams that were in evidence in many of the schools that we studied within these districts (see Portin et al., 2009). But central office transformation in all three systems prioritized the relationship between the central office and school principals as essential for school improvement.

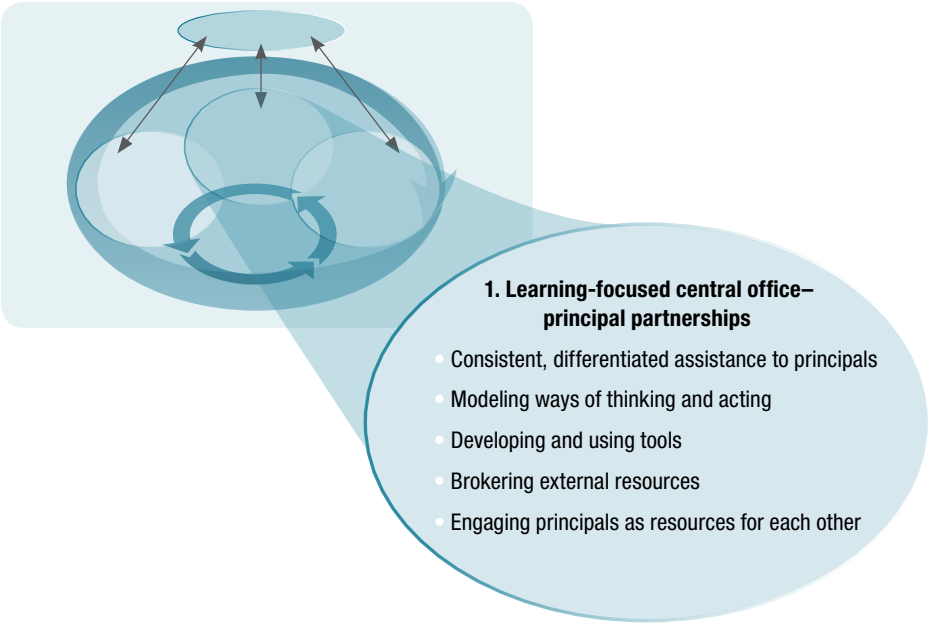
The five dimensions of central office transformations do not assign roles and responsibilities by position, such as assistant superintendents or budget analysts; rather, these practices and activities seemed promising in the ways described above when some combination of central office administrators engage in these activities. For instance, in Atlanta Public Schools, the superintendent, deputy superintendent, and chief of staff carried out many of the activities under stewardship (Dimension 4), but in the Oakland Unified School District and New York City/Empowerment Schools Organization, those activities (when they were carried out) tended to comprise the work of the chief academic officers and a combination of other central office executive staff. Similarly, in New York City, executive central office staff designed and implemented most of the regular professional development for the ILDs (Dimension Two), whereas in Atlanta Public Schools this work was carried out by a combination of central office staff and external consultants, and in Oakland Unified School District, a non-profit organization partnered with the school district facilitated many of those activities. Whether or not the professional development seemed associated with actually supporting and strengthening ILD's practice seemed less related to who delivered the supports and more to the strategies involved in the support. Accordingly, in the pages that follow we do not describe specific activities that superintendents, assistant superintendents, or other central office staff occupying specific roles carry out in transforming central offices but rather lines of work that transforming central offices support among their staff in various configurations. In this way our findings further reinforce that central office transformation is not simply a restructuring strategy but a new approach to central office work.

CHAPTER 2

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

All three central offices organized their central office transformation strategies around new relationships between school principals and central office administrators to intentionally support teaching and learning improvement in schools, highlighted schematically in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Dimension 1: Learning-focused Central Office–Principal Partnerships



Through *these learning-focused partnerships, the central office aimed to make substantial investments in building the capacity of school principals to exercise instructional leadership*. While definitions of instructional leadership varied somewhat across sites, the efforts across all sites suggested a consensus that when principals exercise instructional leadership, they work intensively with their teachers in and out of the classroom to critically examine the quality of their teaching practice and student work in an attempt to strengthen both. As noted earlier, various other central office administrators interacted with school principals in other

ways and also directly with teachers. Nor were school principals the only people exercising instructional leadership within schools.[6] However, a clear hallmark of the central office transformation efforts involved these dedicated central office administrators focusing on strengthening the capacity of school principals for instructional leadership.

We called these dedicated central office administrators, as a group, Instructional Leadership Directors (ILDs). As indicated in Table 3, the ILDs varied according to formal titles, backgrounds, resources, and supervisory relationships with school principals. For example, ILDs in Atlanta and Oakland all had prior leadership experience in education, including school principalships. By contrast, NYC network leaders came from inside and outside school systems and not all had been school principals.

Table 3. Comparison of Instructional Leadership Directors' Backgrounds, Resources, and Formal Relationships with Principals

ILD Formal Title	Professional Background	Staffing Resources	Also Evaluates Principal	Method of Principal Assignment
Atlanta: **School Reform Team (SRT) Executive Directors**	Education	Team: 10–14 Model Teacher Leaders	YES	Principal choice; central assignment
NYC/Empowerment Schools Organization: **Network Leaders**	Various	Team: 2 academic-focused 2 service-focused	NO	Principal choice
Oakland: **Network Executive Officers (NExOs)**	Education	Limited	YES	Central assignment

All the ILDs reported that they were responsible for working with principals individually and in networks to strengthen principals' instructional leadership. As one NYC network leader put it, "I help principals realize [that the] more they're in classrooms, the easier their job gets." Another explained that the main work involved engaging principals to talk "about how a lot of teachers work in isolation

[6] As a companion study documents more fully (Portin et al. 2009), a growing cadre of teacher leaders and other staff in many of the schools we studied were engaged in instructional leadership activity, often in teams led by the principal.

and don't get the feedback necessary to grow. How teachers are losing professionalism because there is no true check [on their practice]." This network leader went on to explain that he/she helps principals understand that their main work as instructional leaders includes breaking down such teacher isolation through strategies that focus on feedback and helping teachers to grow. Many described such work as fundamentally involving helping some principals shift their conceptions of the principalship from a job involving mainly managerial functions to a profession centrally focused on helping teachers improve their teaching practice. As one ILD put it,

> I … spend time in [schools] helping the principals … focus their work… . Working on the quality of teaching and learning. Looking at the student work. Looking at the rigor. Looking at best practices. Giving them feedback. [If I don't] … it's not going to pay out in dividends in the student achievement. Because … we are creatures of habit first of all. So taking a principal who has not spent time in their classrooms and getting them to shift their focus takes a lot of … intentional work. And then to be able to maintain that focus in a culture where people [e.g., teachers] are used to … keeping you in an office to deal with this one [student] all day—that's a whole other level of work … . And then helping people [principals] to prioritize their time so that they do spend their time on the core business in the areas that matter the most.

However, we found clear differences in how the ILDs went about their work. Some ILDs frequently worked with school principals in ways that reflected the promising practices noted in Chapter 1. Because research across disciplines has identified those practices as important supports for helping others improve the quality of their own work, ILDs' engagement in those practices can be thought of as a form of support that is likely to improve principals' instructional leadership.[7]

Certain ILDs engaged in promising practices significantly more often than others over the course of the study period. Strikingly, ILDs who did so often or very often were also those whom principals almost unanimously reported supported their development as instructional leaders. Conversely, ILDs who infrequently engaged in these practices were mentioned by principals as having limited or negative effects on their instructional leadership. Reports from other central office admin-

[7] One practice noted in Chapter 1—differentiating supports for principals' instructional leadership consistently over the entire academic year—was not anticipated by the learning theories on which we based our study, but emerged as a clear pattern distinguishing how ILDs worked with principals.

istrators about more or less effective ILDs also confirmed these distinctions. On the basis of that evidence, ***we identify the following ILD practices in the one-on-one principal relationships and principal networks as likely to help principals strengthen their capacity for engaging in instructional leadership***:

- Differentiating supports for principals' instructional leadership consistently over the entire academic year.
- Modeling ways of thinking and acting that reflected desirable instructional leadership practice.
- Developing and using tools.
- Brokering resources supportive of principals' instructional leadership.
- Tapping all principals in a network as resources for each other around their instructional leadership practice, including providing opportunities for all, not only those in high-achieving schools, to take on leadership roles within the network.

We summarize our findings about each of these points below.

Supporting Individual Principals in Strengthening Instructional Leadership

Differentiating supports for principals' instructional leadership consistently over the entire academic year

All the ILDs unanimously explained and demonstrated that they differentiated how they supported individual school principals in strengthening their instructional leadership. That is, they did not take a one-size-fits-all approach but rather worked with each principal differently depending on a variety of considerations. However, not all ILDs were able to sustain their differentiated work with individual principals over the entire academic year. Those who appeared inconsistent in this regard tended to be viewed by principals and other central office administrators as relatively ineffective in strengthening principals' instructional leadership.

Two of our three interviews asked ILDs to identify the two-three principals they worked with most often and least often and to describe concrete examples of how they worked with those principals. Each interviewee provided examples of

how they tailored their work with individual principals within and between these groups, based on a variety of factors including principals' instructional leadership ability, school performance, and the extent to which the school principal reached out to them. For example, one NYC network leader described the range of the problems of practice in this way,

> … it may be about sitting with their professional development team, listening to what they're trying to put together, and then asking questions to help them through that. It could be in terms of looking at classes—an initiative that the school may have and they want to see how the instruction is going, or it could be because they want a different lens on a teacher that they feel is not performing up to par and they just want my input on that. It could be a parent meeting that they're having to explain the data and how to look at the data, or things like strategies like how to read with your children, or building vocabulary—activities that they can do at home. It could be around having conversations with some principals that may be stressed and overwhelmed and talking crazy, like "I'm quitting."

Likewise, in Atlanta, one School Reform Team (SRT) executive director spoke about the particular needs of a subset of new principals who had strong capacity to observe instruction, provide feedback to teachers, and plan for individual and group professional development; however, these particular principals lacked experience with operational issues which took time away from focusing on instruction. Accordingly, the SRT executive directors and principals agreed to focus their work together to improve the operational supports in those schools. By contrast, another principal had recently moved from a middle school to a high school. This principal had been a strong instructional leader the middle school but needed support to exercise leadership appropriate to the new high school setting. The same executive director focused work with that principal on using data to understand the dynamics of the school's small learning communities and how to strengthen teaching and learning within those communities. Principals in these examples corroborated the ILDs' accounts of how they addressed issues specific to the principals and their school.

Shadowing ILDs yielded further evidence of such differentiation. For example, on one occasion we observed an SRT Executive Director working with a new principal identified as in need of support around classroom observations. In the executive director's words, "I recognize there is a learning curve [for new princi-

pals], but I need [the principal] to be focused on the right stuff [now, in observing in classrooms]. So, I can't leave that to chance." During the observation, the executive director stayed physically close to the principal through three classrooms and frequently engaged the principal in conversation about evidence from the classrooms that did or did not fit the standards of high-quality teaching outlined in an observation rubric. In a separate debriefing conversation, the executive director walked the principal point-by-point through the rubric and challenged the quality of the principal's evidence and the fit with the rubric. The meeting concluded with the executive director listing specific actions for the principal to take when observing classrooms before the next meeting. By contrast, on a visit to the school of another principal, identified as more expert in the area of classroom observations, the executive director and principal observed the same classrooms with the rubric but with little to no dialog among them. During the debrief conversation, the executive director and principal compared teacher ratings, finding only a few discrepancies. The principal led most of the debrief, asking the executive director for advice on particular teachers and other issues related to school improvement plans. The meeting concluded with the principal sharing next steps for teacher development.

These and other examples suggest that ***when ILDs differentiated supports, they did not simply work with individual principals differently. Rather, they worked with each principal in ways that fit individual needs and strengths related to improving instructional leadership practice, much like expert classroom teachers differentiate instruction for individual students.*** One common strategy involved helping principals identify their own improvement goals or otherwise participate centrally in determining the focus of their work with their ILD. As one network leader reflected about the practice of network leaders in general,

> What I think [all the Network Leaders do] really well is … we'll work with you [i.e., school principals] around your questions [about teaching and learning improvement]. If you tell us what your questions are and you tell us what *you* want to work on, we'll help you think that through, and we'll help you figure out a way of pursuing that.

In Atlanta, ILDs' engagement with principals in mutually identifying anchoring problems of practice evolved after many years of central office transformation. As one SRT executive director described, in the early years of the reform effort central office leaders chose an area of focus for the principals:

> We started out with reading, and English, and language arts, knowing that that was our main focus because all of the data indicated that the students, if they couldn't read, they couldn't do anything else. And believe me, reading at the time was quite dismal. I think that the district average was 47% nine years ago in reading, and even my SRT was 37%. … The district is somewhere around 82% now, but I mean there's some drastic gains out there. But the idea was that you had to fix the roof and also the sides, to go out the elementary schools first, because [that's] the base.

This ILD went on to explain that as school performance improved, principals had the opportunity to take more ownership of instructional decisions, including having input into the focal problems of practice.

> Now most of those schools have more autonomy through me. They're still directed [by the central office] … but if they [principals] come up with something they want to do now, and they have the scores to justify it, [they can try something new].

These and other data suggest that when the ILDs worked with individual principals, they differentiated how they worked with them. However, some did not continue to work with individual principals in a differentiated way over the entire academic year. For example, some principals reported that they did not see their ILD very often. Others reported that their work with their ILD waned over the course of the academic year. For instance, one principal reported that meetings with the ILD decreased from monthly in the first semester to just one meeting in the second semester, and that despite reaching out to the ILD, "I rarely got responses." When asked about the reason for the decrease, this principal reported, "I think it's just like most things, particularly in education. … You get too many fires to put out, too many other priorities and so I just got the sense that [my ILD] had other priorities to deal with other than working directly with me or [my school]." But some veteran principals viewed the limited attention they received from their ILD as a sign that their ILD was differentiating support among new versus veteran principals. For instance, one principal reported,

> [There are] … principals who have less experience than I do. They're in their first year or their second year and I'm even now, with four years, in a different place than where they are. So, I think that they [the ILDs and other central office administrators] understand that and I think it directly impacts the way that they work with us. I think that sometimes it's created some confusion in some ways because we're not all necessarily asking for the same thing all the time, so I actually think on

> their end, it's a rather difficult job to manage. It's pretty analogous to having a class full of heterogeneous students where people need very, very different things. So, I think they have largely done a pretty damn good job of juggling the whole thing and trying to meet everyone's needs. But, I think the demands are pretty great on them.

Some ILDs attributed their occasionally spotty focus on individualized support to resistance on the part of principals to keeping meetings with them and otherwise following up on their individualized improvement plans. As one ILD described,

> … for too long, most of the principals I have … have been in their spots going on five years. And in that five years [in this district] there was no discussion about instruction—there wasn't any, and they'll all tell you that. None of them were evaluated so they didn't get feedback, and so this is pretty new to them—have someone asking questions … . And they certainly aren't used to someone contacting them at least once a week and interacting with someone at least once a week—not around instruction. There might have been someone calling and saying, "Where is your latest check-off sheet or something," but definitely not instruction.

Multiple NYC respondents reported that some school principals had chosen the Empowerment Schools Organization as their School Support Organization precisely because they did not want central office involvement in their school, which may have contributed to this particular challenge in the NYC context.

In Oakland, the ILDs also struggled to maintain differentiated work with individual principals on instructional leadership due to excessive demands to work with principals on school compliance issues. Some NExOs resisted such demands. As one NExO described,

> Last year I got completely awash in that logistical kind of side-tracking stuff. And so we as NExO's made a commitment to 24 hours in schools focused on instruction every week. And so what I'm doing is I'm starting to ignore the non-instructional stuff … . Now, so if a principal calls me [with a non-instructional issue] I'll act on it—[but if] it's a cc on an e-mail… I don't get involved … . And I don't feel bad about it because I'm really getting feedback, too, from the principals [that we] … are truly making a difference for their instructional focus and what they're doing for instruction for the kids.

However, others reported that by spring they had canceled most of their individual school visits due to personnel hearings and other matters.

Modeling Ways of Thinking and Acting

Modeling or demonstrating particular ways of thinking and acting are essential strategies for helping people such as school principals change their work practices. Models provide "an advanced organizer for the initial attempts to execute a complex skill … an interpretive structure for making sense of the feedback, hints, and connections from the master during interactive coaching sessions, … . And … an internalized guide for the period when the apprentice is engaged in relatively independent practice" (Collins et al., 2003, p.2). As one ILD put it, ***modeling or demonstrating instructional leadership actions proved a far more effective strategy for actually influencing principals' practice than "telling them."*** This administrator went on to say, "I recognize that there's a delicate balance between what I know and what they need to know. And so telling them is really not an effective method." Instead this person routinely modeled particular instructional leadership practices, "because, ultimately, when I leave, I want them to know how to do it [exercise instructional leadership]."

Research on learning also underscores that the strength of models as learning supports hinges, in part, on the modelers' or others' use of strategies that help the learner reflect on their learning (also referred to as "metacognitive" strategies), such as explicitly pointing out to principals what practices and ways of thinking the models are modeling and their underlying rationales for doing so (Brown & Campione, 1994; Collins, Brown, & Holum, 2003; Lee & Smith, 1995; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991). Absent such strategies, learners may not notice that a particular practice is being modeled or understand the underlying rationale for the modeling (Collins et al., 2003; Lee & Smith, 1995).

The ILDs varied in terms of whether and how frequently they used these forms of modeling as strategies for influencing principals' instructional leadership practice. As noted earlier, ***ILDs who frequently modeled instructional leadership practices were most frequently identified by principals and other central office administrators as positively influencing principals' instructional leadership.*** Conversely, ILDs who infrequently modeled tended to be seen by principals and other central office administrators as providing limited or ineffective supports for principals' instructional leadership.

For example, ILDs frequently demonstrated for principals how to have challenging conversations with teachers about how to improve their teaching practice. For instance, several Oakland ILDs routinely modeled for their principals how to

run meetings to help teaching staff make sense of data on how their instructional practice might be contributing to particular test results. One NExO facilitated staff meetings at three schools with each principal observing and documenting the strategies used in talking with teachers. The NExO and the principal later met to discuss the strategies, and the principal subsequently practiced those strategies in another meeting with teachers, with the NExO observing and providing feedback.

Similarly, at a meeting of New York City network leaders that we observed in the fall of 2007, one network leader described a school that almost received a failing grade on its school progress report. In a professional development session designed to address the school's poor grade, the network leader reflected that everyone was "friendly"—meaning the teachers did not honestly confront the root causes of their school's low-levels of performance. "We talked about that, that it's okay to get friendly, but you got to get down to business." What ultimately helped the school principal understand how to "get down to business" and have those challenging conversations was for the network leader to first model a direct and honest conversation focused on implications from the data for the principal's personal leadership practice, and then to reflect with the principal on that conversation for ideas about how to have similar conversations with teachers.

ILDs also helped principals engage in instructional leadership when they modeled ways of thinking that reflected good instructional leadership practice. One NExO in Oakland described this modeling work as coaching the principal's ways of thinking:

> … talking through what [the principal's] thinking is and then helping him to see where that might take him, so the principal has time to stop and actually think about why he is making the decisions that he's making … . [A principal will oftentimes jump to decision-making without stepping back and really thinking about how he's making [decisions], who he's involving in the process, and then what are the consequences of that … .[8]

The NExO went on to illustrate this process of modeling thinking with a specific example that we corroborated in interviews with the principal,

> So [a principal] asks staff to do something … . she may say, "I want you all to make sure that you post objectives … [in your classrooms], and expects once [this has been] said, that it is going to happen…. And one of the teachers says "No,

[8] To maintain the confidentiality of the participants in this study, we alternately use "him" and "her" in direct and indirect quotes.

> I don't want to do that," or a teacher doesn't do it and then … [the principal's] immediate reaction is "Okay, we've got to do something to get this teacher out of here."… Without understanding … the culture of [the] school. [The principal] doesn't necessarily put herself in the position of those she's attempting to move … . [So my work involved] taking her back to where the initial thought happens so that she can understand there are other options, and why is she thinking that, what about her and her approach to the work is taking her there?

Through the metacognitive conversations, the ILD provided the principal with specific examples of other ways to think about the situation, consistent with instructional leadership, and how to weigh the pros and cons of each choice.

The ILDs whose work was corroborated by positive reports of supporting principals' instructional leadership not only modeled ways of thinking but also routinely used reflective strategies to help principals see what they were modeling and why. As one Oakland NExO explained, "If I'm going to have any impact at all on these schools, I have to … teach them [my principals] and teach them why we're doing what we're doing…to help them to become instructional leaders." This ILD further explained that unless the principals understood the underlying rationale for certain practices, they were more likely to perceive their engagement with the ILD as a directive and evaluative rather than supportive relationship and to resist participating in it. We confirmed most of these reports through direct observations. For example, during one observation an Atlanta ILD demonstrated for a school principal how to use data to provide feedback to a particular teacher. The ILD then reflected back to the school principal what kinds of strategies he was using to help the teacher see the urgency to change her practice, including displaying data in certain ways and asking the teacher first to interpret the data.

Counter examples—instances in which ILDs did not model ways of thinking and acting for principals but rather stepped in and essentially did the principals' work for them or told them what to do without creating intentional opportunities for their principals to observe or practice the work—confirmed the potential power of reflective modeling. While such activities resulted in some principals' work getting done, they did not seem in any way tied to building principals' capacity for instructional leadership (or other activities, for that matter). For example, when asked how she helped a school principal fund a particular instructional program, an ILD described opening up a school budget and making adjustments herself. When asked directly to what extent she also demonstrated these budgeting strategies to

her principals or thought such demonstrations might be important for the principals' development, this ILD responded that it was easier for her to just go in and make the change. Similarly, an ILD believed that certain principals were not using school-based coaches in effective ways. Rather than modeling alternatives or otherwise engaging principals themselves in addressing this challenge, the ILD stepped in for principals and gave direct mandates to the coaches about how they used their time. Perhaps not surprisingly, the principals in these examples reported that their ILDs did not help them appreciably build their instructional leadership capacity.

Developing and Using Tools in One-on-one Assistance Relationships

All the ILDs across all three districts used various materials in their work with individual principals.[9] Some of these materials appeared to be what learning research distinguishes as "tools"—materials intentionally designed with features to engage principals in new ways of thinking and acting that reflect good instructional leadership practice. *Conceptual tools* include "principles, frameworks, and ideas" (Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999). These tools generally function to frame how people think about issues as a main strategy for shifting how people think and act. *Practical tools* likewise aim to shift people's thinking and actions but by leading with specific examples of "practices, strategies, and resources" that have "local and immediate utility" (Grossman et al., 1999, p. 13–14). While conceptual tools are meant to shape decisions across multiple activity settings, practical tools are generally constructed around a particular activity setting. Across both tool types, the effectiveness of a tool in influencing users' practice hinges substantially on the extent to which people use tools to engage learners in challenging conversations about the implications for their own practice of the ideas embedded in the tools (Honig & Ikemoto, 2008).

We found four types of tools commonly used by ILDs in their assistance relationships with individual principals in at least two of our three study districts:[10]

- teaching and learning frameworks intended to define common conceptual understanding of what constitutes quality teaching and learning (Atlanta and New York City);

[9] School principals in our districts had various tools available to them from different sources, including central office administrators other than the ILDs and external organizations. Here, in keeping with our study focus, we specifically address tools the ILDs used in the context of their one-on-one assistance relationships with principals.

[10] Honig & Ikemoto (2008) distinguish these tools as organizational tools, those commonly in use across organizations.

- school walkthroughs and other classroom-observation protocols that guided how leaders observed classroom teaching and learning (Atlanta, New York City and Oakland);
- cycle-of-inquiry protocols (New York City and Oakland); and
- data-based protocols designed to focus principals' instructional leadership practice on outcomes of various kinds (Atlanta, Oakland and New York City).

All the ILDs in the three systems incorporated tools into their work with school principals but not all of them used them to engage principals in challenging conversations in the ways that research suggests holds promise for strengthening principals' instructional leadership. Consistent with the other findings, ***ILDs who did engage principals in such conversations were also those ILDs who received positive reviews from other central office administrators and school principals themselves about the quality of their work with school principals.***

Teaching and learning frameworks. We observed ILDs in two of the three districts using instructional frameworks—conceptual tools designed to help define "quality" teaching and learning. This practice was most common in Atlanta, where all the School Reform Team (SRT) executive directors used a district-sponsored, externally developed tool—the *26 Best Practices*—in their work with individual school principals. The tool, derived from research on and experience with teaching for conceptual understanding, called on teachers, among other practices, to routinely ask students questions that moved beyond simple recall and required students "to think, synthesize, evaluate, and conclude."[11] We documented how the SRT executive directors used this tool often in their discussions with individual principals to critically examine the quality of classroom teaching. An SRT executive director explained in a meeting with colleagues, "At one time we were all using different instruments" that defined and measured high-quality teaching and learning. Now with the *26 Best Practices*,

> We have a centralized … instrument that all of us use—whether you're a principal, teacher, or central office executive director—that we created to improve the principals. And that's the [basis for the] audit that we use when we talk about their performance … . So everyone is familiar with that.

[11] Atlanta Public Schools (N.D.). Lesson Observation Form. Atlanta, GA: Author. Collected in 2007.

Observations and interviews confirmed that principals' work with SRT executive directors using this tool enhanced their ability to provide targeted feedback to teachers about their instruction. In a typical comment, one Atlanta principal said, "I believe that I have been able to provide my teachers with great feedback from that instrument because it is measuring their performance to a standard, to a real rubric they can see." They also showed us written records of feedback to individual teachers with evidence from classroom observations organized around the *26 Best Practices*.

By contrast, the absence of such a tool in Oakland seemed to compromise the ILDs' work in strengthening principals' instructional leadership. For example, we observed that when some Oakland NExOs accompanied principals into classrooms to look critically at the quality of teaching, their discussions were not rooted in a similarly clear, consistent conception of high-quality teaching and learning. Perhaps as a result, the discussions about the quality of teaching on these visits often remained at a superficial level, with principals noticing whether or not objectives were visibly posted in the classroom for example but not teachers' actual pedagogical strategies or interactions with students, and NExOs generally not responding with challenging questions about principals' understanding of high-quality teaching and implications for principals' practice. Likewise NExOs for the most part reported that some of their principals lacked knowledge of high-quality teaching and learning. Some other central office administrators similarly noted that ILDs were not operating from a common research-based framework defining such classroom practice.

School walk-throughs.[12] In all three of our sites, ILDs routinely relied on protocols that called for principals to observe teachers' classroom practice to collect evidence of that practice for use in subsequent conversations with the teachers about how they might improve their teaching practice. NExOs in Oakland, for example, worked together with their Chief Academic Officer to develop a master walk-through protocol that they each adapted for use with different school principals. Four of the five NExOs in our study used the protocol as the basis for monthly meetings with each school principal. In Atlanta, the SRT executive directors translated the *26 Best Practices* instrument into a protocol for classroom observations.

[12] These tools go by various names in practice including Learning Walks. Since the term LearningWalk is copyrighted by the Institute for Learning, we use the more general term, "walk through" to refer to these tools. However, some of the network leaders in NYC specifically used the Institute for Learning's LearningWalk protocol which had been developed through consultation with former NYC Community School District #2 Superintendent Anthony Alvarado.

The adapted tools included a lesson observation form, which provided space for observers to record their rankings of the intensity-level of various practices and any instances of students being off-task, and a form to use to guide feedback to teachers. In NYC a subset of network leaders regularly observed classrooms with individual school principals and in most cases used a formal protocol as a tool for anchoring those observations.

However, ILDs' use of these protocols to anchor challenging conversations with principals about their instructional leadership practice varied greatly. As one principal recounted, the ILD conducted walkthroughs but the walkthroughs did not have a positive influence on the principal's instructional leadership practice. The ILD would …

> … just come in [to the classroom], stand at the back, take some notes, walk away, and send me an e-mail a couple of days later and say how horrible the observation was. If it's really that bad then you should have been compelled to have a conversation with that teacher or at least a conversation with me. "Hey … this is what I just saw—let's go into the class together this next period, observe it together and find out where we can help support this teacher and improve his instruction."

Cycle-of-inquiry protocols. In New York City and Oakland, ILDs used formal cycle-of-inquiry protocols to ground one-on-one interactions with principals around instructional leadership practice. Some respondents in our study used the term "inquiry" to refer to any strategy that involved posing questions of principals. By contrast, cycle-of-inquiry protocols have been associated with helping improve principals' (and other professionals') work practices when they prompt principals to identify a specific problem of practice related to their efforts to improve teaching and learning; to collect evidence to help them better understand the underlying causes of that problem; to develop strategies supported by a rationale for how the course of action would address the problem; and finally, to continually collect evidence to assess progress toward solving the problem of practice (Copland, 2003). One of the ILDs in Oakland described the importance of the cycle of inquiry process in this way:

> … if either of them [two principals] get good at that cycle of inquiry or how they look at new data in enhancing staff skills about instruction [as the main focus of one of their inquiry cycles], and we go really deep into that, then those systems and that discipline will have larger effects into the rest of their work.

In New York City, a district-wide initiative called the Children First Intensive (CFI) required all schools to convene school-based teams in a year-long cycle-of-inquiry process around the progress of a subset of students at each school.[13] Some New York network leaders said they adapted the CFI tools and processes to help engage principals in critical conversations about how their practice mattered to improving results for those students. In the words of one,

> So now we're working with assistant principals and principals and teachers to really own this [Children First Intensive and other assessments] and make it relevant for them.... [T]hat's the work. [T]hat's the focus for us. Not walking around a building and making recommendations, but more okay, how are you using the tools of accountability, how are we using the inquiry team, how are we helping them identify a school-wide focus, identify a population of kids? So that's the instructional work that we do.

Likewise, we observed how at least in Oakland, those NExOs identified as supporting principals' instructional leadership used cycle-of-inquiry protocols to engage principals in challenging conversations about their instructional leadership practice. For example, we saw e-mail exchanges between those NExOs and their school principals detailing action steps the NExOs and the principals had agreed the principals would take as part of a particular cycle of inquiry process, and products the principals would review at upcoming meetings with their NExO as evidence of their work.

Data-based protocols. All the tools above engaged principals in considering various data related to the quality of classroom teaching and learning as fundamental to their exercise of instructional leadership. Some ILDs across our districts did not simply put raw data in front of school principals but rather engaged school principals in data-based protocols—tools that presented specific data and posed questions about the implications of the data for principals' instructional leadership. Principals' whose ILDs utilized such protocols were more likely than other principals to report and demonstrate that they understood how to use student performance data and data from classroom observations to inform their own leadership practice.

For example, in Atlanta, we frequently observed SRT executive directors using the *26 Best Practices* to organize evidence they collected while reviewing student

[13] New York City Department of Education. (2008). Children First Intensive Inquiry Team Handbook. New York City: Author.

work and teachers practice along with different "dashboards" for displaying student performance data. Principals generally reported that they knew what their SRT executive directors were looking for when they visited their schools and the kind of questions they would ask about action on the results. In a comment typical across almost all of the ILDs in this district, one reported that such tools helped them juxtapose seemingly contradictory evidence of principals' work in ways that challenged their leadership actions in support of improving classroom teaching,

> I had one principal—every one of the teachers got 100% on their performance evaluations … . They [the teachers] only have about 57% of their kids meeting or exceeding the state standards. A third of their kids didn't pass the … [state test]. When … every one of the teachers got 100% on their performance evaluation [from the principal], I said "Who's 100%? You? Who? How does everybody get 100%?" I started asking principals to do a correlation between the performance evaluation ratings you've given these people and the data. How can you have 90% of your staff exceed and 40% of your kids are exceeding. I don't understand the correlation there … . You can't just come in here and do a mediocre job for our kids anymore. You got to get better.

This executive director went on to describe one principal's reaction to working with data in this way as typical of many principals' responses,

> [The principal] told me … "[y]ou forced my hand. You have forced me to really understand this and take a look at it and really see. I get it."… And so [this principal] used the words that I "forced him." But it will not be a force in the future because [this principal now] gets it … . [W]e were having the conversations …, but I had to find some way in black and white and actually make [the principal] work through it.

In significant counter examples, some ILDs engaged their principals with data but not as part of a protocol for helping principals meaningfully grapple with implications of the data for their own instructional leadership practice. Such examples typically featured the ILDs presenting principals with data to help justify why principals should follow the ILD's directives when making particular decisions.

Brokering for Individual Principals

ILDs also helped advance individual principals' instructional leadership practice when they engaged in brokering activities. Research on learning emphasizes the importance of brokering to helping improve the learners' own and others' work practices. Brokering involves both *bridging* people to new ideas, understandings, and other resources that can potentially advance their work, and also *buffering* them from potentially unproductive external interference (Wenger, 1998). Often called "boundary spanning," such activities contribute to improvement when they involve people such as ILDs not simply passing along new resources but translating them into forms that others may be especially likely to use (Aldrich & Herker, 1977; Cobb & Bowers, 1999; Dollinger, 1984; Tushman, 1977; Tushman & Katz, 1980). We distinguished more and less promising bridging and buffering activities based on the extent to which they seemed to increase the time that school principals spent on instructional matters.

Bridging. ILDs in all three districts supported their individual principals by bridging them to resources beyond those immediately available in their one-on-one relationship. First, ILDs connected school principals *to others in their central offices* who supported their instructional leadership. In two of our districts, these resources very frequently included members of the network teams who worked for the ILDs—model teacher leaders (MTLs) who were part of each school reform team in Atlanta and achievement coaches who were on the staff of each network team in New York City—who engaged with principals and schools daily around instructional matters. In Atlanta in particular, the MTLs frequently helped principals in various ways, including collecting and organizing school progress data, modeling how to facilitate school leadership team meetings around issues of teaching and learning improvement (rather than, for example, mainly governance or operations), and modeling how to provide meaningful feedback to classroom teachers. On some occasions, the executive directors assigned their entire team of MTLs (between 10 and 14 people, typically) to struggling schools to assist with various dimensions of school improvement including principals' instructional leadership. As one executive director described in one instance,

> My whole team has been assigned to support [a school] this year. We went in that building in September. I had a principal that's been on the job for about a year. I started hearing rumblings in August that … kids were just kind of not focused, teachers not focused. So … the first week of September we did a school kind of blitz site visit and spent about two and a half hours in there … going into class-

> rooms spending 20 minutes … looking for evidence of teaching and learning, gave the principal some feedback, went back about three weeks later. And I realized that they had gotten off to a rocky, rocky start … . I told everybody on the team that … I expect everybody to go into that school once a week and visit classrooms, observe instruction, give feedback, provide support to teachers.

During our observations in Atlanta we almost always found these staff working in classrooms in these ways.

The Oakland NExOs did not have staff to deploy to principals and schools but some of them frequently tried to connect principals with others in the central office who served as vital instructional support resources. Two NExOs, in particular, routinely invited other central office administrators to attend their individual school site visits and arranged for staff from the district's instructional services unit to provide modeling for principals in targeted subject areas. However, NExOs' attempts at bridging to other central office administrators for instructional resources did not always result in increased resources to principals. As one NExO described,

> So what I do is I send my calendar around and [a central office administrator] says "Oh, I want to come to schools with you," and I say "Just let me know anytime" and I send my calendar, but she tends not to contact me … I think [that this is because] she just feels like she has her] own work. She is busy. I mean we do make arrangements for these guys to get in when we're doing these … school walk-throughs and I do really enjoy listening to them, having them be part of the debrief, but I think it would be great if they were there more often.

ILDs also linked to others in the central office to help principals with activities traditionally distinguished as operational, managerial, or otherwise non-instructional in nature. ILDs cast such bridging activities as essential to helping principals spend less time on those issues and more on instructional matters. Typically ILDs became involved in these non-instructional matters when other central office units did not respond to principals in a timely manner or with the right services. ILDs found such intervention important in all our districts, including Atlanta, where the central office had been working the longest to improve the quality and responsiveness of central office units to principals. As one executive director in that district reported,

> Part of our work as SRTs is to broker services and support [for school principals]. I don't feel like there's any [central office] department that I don't have contact with.

> Quite frankly, we have some departments I wish I didn't have as much contact with … I mean … a manager and 35 [staff work in that unit] but when there's a problem in a school [related to that unit] sometimes the principals feel like they have to get me involved so they get an immediate resolution And I really wish it were not that way because I need for departments and individuals to be as responsive when a principal calls the first time as they are when I call … . I probably talk to my [other central office] person every day, multiple times a day. Usually I'm calling to either … get her to answer a question about a [unit-specific] issue or [other unit-specific] issue on behalf of one of the principals so that they can focus on their school work.

ILDs also connected principals *to resources outside the district system* to help improve principals' instructional leadership. Such efforts typically involved not only identifying the resources and establishing relationships with outside individuals and organizations but also raising or redirecting funds to help principals pay for those resources. For instance, an Atlanta executive director described efforts to bridge to external resources as looking for resources for principals "anywhere … . I don't think you could have any boundaries to where you can get the services."

By comparison, in Oakland, NExOs' activities to help principals access outside resources tended to involve identifying funds schools could use to purchase certain services and then encouraging schools to use those funds in particular ways. Such fundraising and advocacy with principals around spending seemed especially important in this district given severe budget shortages within the district and statewide in California, NExOs' own extremely limited budgets, and Oakland's Results-Based Budgeting system that aimed to maximize the dollars under principals' rather than central office discretion.

Buffering. In addition to these various bridging strategies, ***ILDs buffered their principals from external demands as a strategy to support their instructional leadership practice.*** We distinguished buffering activities as those that protected or shielded individual principals from demands that jeopardized their ability to focus on instructional leadership work. Specific forms of buffering across all three districts included taking demands off principals' plates, standing in for other central office units so the principals interacted with ILDs rather than those other units, and translating external demands to limit the amount of time principals spent sorting through and making sense of them.

First, ILDs in all three districts *occasionally took demands off principals' plates* either by deciding that principals did not have to participate in particular activities,

such as district-sponsored informational meetings, that might require the principal to be away from school or otherwise not focused on instructional issues, or by meeting those demands themselves. The latter activities differed from ILDs efforts to substitute for principals, discussed above under modeling, in that they involved ILDs running interference with activities that did not seem essential for principals to engage in as part of taking responsibility for instructional improvement efforts.

Every single one of the executive directors in Atlanta reported in interviews that they had been specifically charged with taking demands off principals' plates when doing so would help focus efforts on instructional leadership. A New York City network leader put it this way:

> So, one of the things that we're responsible for is taking away many of the distracters that stop schools from being able to focus on teaching and learning and that's what we're trying to do. We take away those distracters, then they don't have those time consuming things, you know, that stop them from really focusing in on instruction.

ILDs also *stood in for, and did the work of, other central office units* to improve the quality and relevance of supports the principals received. For instance, executive directors in Atlanta reported that their job included stepping in and taking care of issues for school principals if other central office staff did not respond and the principal brought the issue to their attention. As one executive director said, "When a principal or an AP reports a problem to me or to my office, *it is our job* to take care of that. I … take care of it." This person went on to describe an incident where a principal had to take time finding a vendor to remove sexually explicit graffiti from the school building because the central office staff responsible for such work had not responded to the principal's request for assistance in a timely manner. "I was so angry that I had a principal that had to deal with that because that's not what they're supposed to be doing." In Oakland, some NExOs likewise took on the work of other central office units to help principals avoid interacting with non-responsive central office staff. As one principal confirmed when describing how one central office administrator never returns their calls: "[My NExO is] who I call. Period." Network leaders in New York City similarly reported that a key part of their work involved stepping in for other central office units to improve the quality and relevance of the services available for their individual schools' teaching and learning improvement efforts.

In New York City and Oakland, the ILDs buffered school principals from multiple and sometimes counter-productive external demands, especially from the rest of the central office, by *translating those demands* into forms that took less of principals' time away from their instructional leadership. As one NExO described these activities,

> I'm a buffer and a translator. I need to take mandates, expectations and re-frame them in such a way that they are meaningful and relevant and manageable for principals. That's my job. And to break it down for them and to simplify and tell them stuff that, especially for my new principals, everything is not equally important, but there are some things that [I say] "Don't drop the ball on this. Don't you dare miss a teacher evaluation deadline." Those are just [too important].

In other words, this administrator and some other ILDs did not simply pass on external demands to school principals, but either helped principals understand how to engage in them in ways that reinforced their own efforts to focus on teaching and learning improvement or suggesting that principals limit the time they spent on those demands. One NExO described helping principals not to simply comply with district-mandated accountability requirements but to adapt how they implemented those mandates to reinforce their efforts:

> The school site plan, SPSA [Single Plan for Student Achievement]… [had a] brand new format, brand new expectations, brand new template last year... . So I set an expectation number one that when [my principals are] doing this [plan development] that they would be very clear and deliberate [about] what were the gap areas that they were filling based on what data. And that they would have an instructional practice focus in their school. They could have more than one, but they would have at least one. So I basically took a district mandate and made it [relevant to principals].

Translation also involved repackaging other information from the rest of the central office so that it would be easier for principals to understand and address. As a principal described, "[My NExO] has this sort of summary e-mail of all the things we need to do that week, but then she forwards on all the other e-mails that I've already gotten but just like puts her little spin on it, like 'you really should read this'." In another principal's words, "[My NExO] sends emails pretty much every week: updates, forwarding emails from the district, sending emails regarding deliverables that are due as reminders." A similar pattern prevailed in New York

City: All the network leaders reported filtering how their schools receive information from the central office.

Principal Networks: A Narrative Example

Those practices—modeling, tool development and use, and brokering—also helped us identify principal *networks* that appeared to offer promising supports for principals' instructional leadership.[14] ILDs in these networks also created opportunities for all their school principals to serve as resources for each other, regardless of their starting capacity. That practice reflects the research-based notion of "legitimizing peripheral participation"—a set of practices in high-quality learning environments that help learners improve their practice by seeing themselves as valuable members of professional communities regardless of their level of knowledge or skill and as on a trajectory toward improving their performance and therefore capable of improvement (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In such communities, even novice members of a group come to strengthen their practice not by sitting on the sidelines and observing but by jumping in even if in modest ways.

These distinctions between networks were not subtle but rather distinctly clear in our data. For instance, one principal described meetings that did not reflect these features as "not effective" in getting the principals to "calibrate their thinking about high-quality teaching and learning." Another principal reported, "I'm not a sit and get person and it [the network meeting] seems more like sit and get. So every time that I come here … it's drudgery . … It should not be that I dread it [the principal network meetings]."

An Example of Promising Network-based Assistance Practice

In the extended narrative example that follows (Vignette 1), derived from our data but edited to protect confidentiality, we illustrate these promising network practices as they played out in one context. We then briefly discuss how the narrative example illustrates modeling, tool use, brokering, and opportunities for principals to serve as resources for the network.

[14] Study data about the network relationships ranged widely from: Interviews with network leaders and school principals in NYC; interviews with various central office staff and occasional observations in Atlanta; and multiple interviews and regular direct observations of the network meetings of five of the eight NExOs in Oakland over time. Because we had substantially more network meeting data from Oakland than the other districts, findings from this site were our strongest influence on how to organize this subsection.

Vignette 1

A Principals' Network Meeting

This meeting took place mid-year at a middle school led by one of the principals in the network. Up to this point, the network had been meeting every other week at a different school site. The agenda for this meeting, distributed to principals two weeks in advance, indicated that the meeting would follow the same format as the other network meetings: Warm up and introductions (30 minutes); classroom walk-through observations (90 minutes); an extended session on a topic selected by the principals (90 minutes); and brief announcements about operational and compliance matters (15 minutes). The meeting with breaks was scheduled for 8am-12pm on a Wednesday, the time network principals chose for holding meetings throughout the year.

When we arrive 20 minutes before the start of the meeting, the Instructional Leadership Director, Dr. Jones (a pseudonym), is already at the school reviewing the meeting agenda with the host principal, Ms. Rosario (a pseudonym). Our interviews with Jones indicated that she routinely worked with host principals in advance of each network meeting to help them take a leadership role in the meeting. In particular, Dr. Jones and the host principal aimed to tailor the school visits (1) to demonstrate for the visiting principals areas in which the host school was particularly strong and (2) to engage the visiting principals in providing the host principal with feedback to further improve her own instructional leadership.

Many principals arrive prior to the start time of the meeting (8am). They sign in on a sheet on a table by the door and talk informally among themselves. The conversations ranges from personal vacation plans to challenges one principal faced in helping certain staff members participate in staff meetings to how one principal incorporated visual arts into her curriculum.

Promptly at 8:00 am Dr. Jones says that they are going to start on time because "that's the way I do it." By 8:00 am almost all the principals have arrived as well as a staff member from the central office curriculum office. This central office staff person told us she was assigned to assist the principals in the network with the instructional focus that the network had chosen for that year: Algebra. Jones begins the meeting by asking the principals to share with the person next to them two things they want to do differently in the next month. "It can be professionally or personally. Because sometimes you have to do one before the other."

After about five minutes, Jones brings the meeting back to order by thanking the principals for their timeliness and reminding them that they are having this meeting at this particular school because they had decided to focus the meeting on how to meet the needs of English language learners, a student population that the host school specifically aims to serve well. Jones asks all the principals to share one word to sum up their starting discussions. The principals share various words such as "excited," "hopeful," and "happy." Jones shares her word: "Confident. In you guys."

After the warm-up, Dr. Jones briefly introduces the host principal, Ms. Rosario, and turns the meeting over to Ms. Rosario. Rosario begins by sharing information on her own professional background. In particular, she had worked previously at a school that did not have the right resources to serve English language learners well. Her prior school had sent her to another district to observe the new international middle schools they had created. She

said, "They were really experimenting with how they could teach English learners. They started getting tremendous results." She goes on to describe her approach to teaching and learning improvement at her school. For example, she describes how she actively recruits teachers with certain kinds of experiences so that the teachers coming in are already "receptive to feedback" and so that all teachers, regardless of their subject matter or grade level, view themselves as responsible for helping English language learners. She briefly describes her faculty meetings, saying that she spends most of the meetings on curricular issues, particularly the challenge of how to differentiate curriculum and instruction within and across classrooms.

Rosario says that a main challenge she faces is how to handle a projected sharp increase in enrollment. She then elaborates on the mission and demographics of the school, which includes many students who had interrupted school careers. Throughout the presentation, principals ask questions, seeking elaboration on the school's history and the principal's approach to working with her teachers and students. Rosario shares a handout that provides data on the school, including demographics pulled from the school district website, information from a formative assessment the school staff had designed, and a one-on-one interview the staff conduct with each student each year to understand their students' educational experiences.

Rosario then distributes a classroom observation template to the group saying, "I designed this walk-through. [Dr. Jones] said we can't look at very much stuff because I should make you focus." The group laughs. Dr. Jones adds that Ms. Rosario initially generated a "long list" of things to observe but that they worked together to focus the walk-through on specific strengths and challenges. Rosario continues that the protocol asks principals to look for specific evidence that students in classrooms have been intentionally grouped to mix students of different language abilities. She also explains that teachers who feel threatened by students who don't speak English well often lecture as a method of control. Such a practice is "not what we want.," so principals should look for any evidence of that practice. She asks the group to look for evidence that students have opportunities to practice their English through reading, writing, and speaking in each classroom. The third portion of the protocol asks principals to look for evidence of differentiated curriculum. She tells the principals that her students are comfortable with visitors and they should sit with the students at their tables. Jones transitions the meeting to the classroom observations.

The principals divide into smaller groups, without facilitation, and begin to enter classrooms. Each group stays in a classroom for approximately 10 minutes and then rotates to another room. In the group we followed, few of the principals take the host principals' advice to sit with students. Instead, they stand at the back of the room and take notes on their protocol forms. Jones entered one of the rooms while this group was observing and immediately sat down with a group of students and began working with them on their task.

After the classroom observations, the principals filter back into the main meeting room where Ms. Rosario is sharing with two other principals how she works with the human resources office to facilitate the hiring of teachers with out-of-state credentials. Another principal comments, "This place [i.e., this school] used to be off the hook. This place was crazy." He describes the chaos that he used to see in the school's courtyard and how he saw no evidence of that today.

Jones returns and asks the group to refocus and give "warm" feedback on their observations. The

principals spend about five minutes giving positive feedback. For example, they comment on specific instances of high levels of student engagement, mixed language groups, high level of English immersion, and good quality of available materials. As each principal shares an observation, Dr. Jones responds with probing questions about the evidence that the principals saw to support their comments. For instance, when a principal said, "Rigor," Dr. Jones said, "What makes you say that lesson was rigorous? What specific things did you see the teacher doing for example that suggested rigor?"

Jones shifts the conversation to "questions and challenges." One principal asks how students will be brought up to grade level and how the principal is coping with some poor quality materials. Another principal describes sitting with one group of students who, when prompted, explained the objectives of a particular lesson in what seemed like their own words. However, students in another small group simply pointed to the board when asked what the purpose of the lesson was. One of the students in the group indicated that the purpose of the lesson was to finish the worksheet before the end of the period.

The host principal does not respond to the questions, per the established norms of the group; the host principal spends this period listening to the visiting principals. Jones notes that she saw students struggling with words that were not standard English, such as "dyin'", "tryin'", and "cryin'". She says that while she was sitting with the students. she wrote the standard version for the students to use as reference. She advises principals that, in her experience, it is too early to use slang with the students. She goes on to challenge the principals by saying, "In my group, not one of you followed the protocol to sit with students. When I walked in I immediately joined a group of students that had an empty seat. What do you think you missed about what was happening in those classrooms because you were looking at it from the back of the room and not down where the students were? What do you think you don't know about that teacher's practice because you didn't talk with students?" The principals briefly discuss the pluses and minuses of not engaging students during the observations. Dr. Jones asks them to pause for two minutes to jot down their reflections about what they might do differently on their next classroom observation to more directly engage students.

After a couple of minutes, one principal asks Rosario if she would be willing to share her expertise in working with English language learners at future network meetings. Another asks how the teachers handle goal setting with the students who seemed advanced but unmotivated. She refers specifically to a student who was asleep in class but who, when awakened, responded correctly to a question. The student had told the visiting principal during the observation that he wanted to be at a different school that he thought was better. Rosario shares that that student had been at that other school the previous year but had received "straight F's." She adds that she knew from interacting with this student informally and in the one-on-one interviews that the student wanted to be in a school with a larger African-American population but that her school was a better fit for that student given his learning needs. A principal says that she saw quality instructional materials on the classroom shelves and would "like to find bridges so that we can learn from you." Jones adds that she and another principal had that same conversation during the classroom observations.

Dr. Jones then holds up a binder of curricular and funding resources that the host school had put

together with the help of staff from the curriculum office. Jones said she had asked the director of the curriculum office if her staff would prepare similar binders for other network principals who wanted them and that the binders should be ready by the next meeting. A principal asks if there is a place where they can look at the materials recommended in the binder. Jones says she will make arrangements with the curriculum director to set up a space in the central curriculum office for principals to review the materials. She added that she requested that the director figure out a way to transition to having all the materials viewable online.

After a 15-minute break, Jones introduces the next agenda item: A presentation by assessment office staff who had arrived earlier in the meeting to observe the classroom observations. Jones explains that one of the reasons she invited staff from that unit is that she wants the principals to know who they are emailing and that they have "supports and we need to access them." She says that the director of the assessment office had recently given a presentation on English language learners to all ILDs and Jones thought the principals should hear the "same information." (We know from interviews with both Jones and the director that Jones had worked with the director in advance of her visit to help her shape the presentation in ways that might particularly resonate with network principals.)

The director introduces the session by acknowledging the challenges school principals face in serving English language learners in middle schools. She adds, "We're here to help you in any way we can. You need to ask us and let us know where we can be the most supportive." The director then turns the presentation over to one of her staff who begins sharing various data on the districts' demographics and the performance of English language learners. Principals ask questions throughout. Both the presenters from the assessment unit as well as Jones respond to the questions. The presenter then guides the principals in a "think-pair-share" exercise to surface their ideas about conditions that keep students from reaching English proficiency and how to overcome barriers to that outcome. All principals share ideas in the large group discussion. Then the presenter continues with additional information from research about conditions that impede students in achieving English proficiency. She concludes with a list of resources available to schools.

The principals applaud as the slide show ends. Jones distributes a book that the presenter brought for principals on some of the issues that they are discussing about how to lead the improvement of instruction for English language learners and suggests that the principals use the book for some good "quick answers."

Jones then transitions to the next agenda items, saying that normally she does not take up two significant issues in one meeting, but she wants them to have time to discuss strategies for spring testing so that they have adequate time to use information from the discussion in their planning. Jones hands out a sheet that lists high-leverage strategies for implementing testing. She says that she compiled these strategies from her own experience and observations in schools. She explains these strategies address some of the concerns the principals had been raising about how to ensure high attendance and engagement on the assessment days and also how not to use too much instructional time for testing. Jones then assigns the principals to groups and asks them to discuss these strategies and other ideas for the spring assessment. Jones told us that she purposefully grouped principals together so that each group had a principal with a "rock solid" approach to the testing period and

a principal that needed more guidance. She said, "It's just like setting up a classroom." Jones does not participate much in the discussion but mainly rotates around to all the groups and listens. After a few minutes, Jones calls the group back together and asks each group to share ideas from their discussion.

With 15 minutes left in the meeting, Jones walks the principals through a folder that includes a new policy for schools that want an exemption from the district curriculum, a list of dates in the upcoming months when various forms will be due, and the availability of an outside consultant to provided professional development on the district's reading curriculum. In presenting each form, Jones says that the principals can read the forms for themselves and she gives brief advice on how to follow up on the requirements. For instance, she explains that responsibility for reviewing the exemptions has shifted to a new person and that if principals want to seek an exemption they should start with that person. The principals ask questions about the procedures around certain purchases. Jones answers them all. One principal says that they tried one of the procedures Jones recommends but it didn't work. Jones respond, "This is good feedback." She says that she knows all the changes in the central office are driving them crazy and that she's working with people in the central office to let them know the principals' concerns. She says that she thinks those other central office staff members are listening. She advises principals with facilities requests to copy her so she can follow up, since staff in that office have been particularly nonresponsive in the past few months. Jones closes the meeting on time by thanking the principals for coming.

Unpacking the Example

This composite case represents a number of aspects of ILD practice in networks that appear promising for strengthening principals' instructional leadership.

Modeling in networks. In the case above, Dr. Jones modeled the importance of principals interacting with students during classroom observations as a key strategy for understanding the quality of teaching in a classroom. Using metacognitive strategies, she also called principals' attention to the fact that she was modeling how to sit with students and engage with them during classroom observations and gave the principals time to discuss the underlying rationale for such strategies and their overall importance. Though not visible from the one meeting described above, Dr. Jones also modeled how to run a meeting focused on deepening participants' knowledge of high-quality instruction, as a way of helping principals run such meetings for their own teachers. At meetings earlier in the year, we had observed Dr. Jones leading the majority of the network meetings to demonstrate how to facilitate discussions about high-quality teaching and learning. In most subsequent network meetings, such as the one described above, Dr. Jones inten-

tionally supported principals taking over meetings themselves to practice such meeting facilitation. Consistent with high-quality modeling practices, Dr. Jones met with Ms. Rosario before the meeting to prepare and after the meeting to debrief the quality of Ms. Rosario's performance. Jones also modeled thinking in her work with Ms. Rosario by talking with her before the meeting about the importance of thinking about the walkthrough template as a device for focusing principals on a few aspects of instruction.

In counter examples, ILDs seemed more often to *direct* principals' practice rather than model it. For example, at one such network meeting, a small group of principals was grappling with the pros and cons of different approaches to improving instructional rigor at one school. The ILD of this network, while walking by the group, overheard part of the discussion and interrupted with specific instructions for what the principal should do. Subsequently, the principals stopped working together to make sense of which improvement approach to pursue and carried on several side conversations.

Developing and using tools. In the case above, Dr. Jones did not simply present a summary of best testing practices but developed a set of materials and a process for engaging principals in challenging conversations about those practices and how principals might use them in their own schools. In addition, Dr. Jones used the *Learning Walk* protocol template prior to the meeting to engage Ms. Rosario in challenging conversations about how to help principals learn from the schools' strengths but also to provide her with critical feedback to strengthen her own performance. During the meeting, the *Learning Walk* protocol prompted principals to look for specific evidence of particular teaching practices. Reinforcing those dimensions of the tool during the debrief conversation, Dr. Jones challenged principals not simply to provide summary evaluative comments about the classroom but to point out specific evidence supporting their claims. We also observed counter examples, in which the ILDs used so many tools during network meetings that principals treated those tools as paperwork they had to complete rather than as materials to aid in their own learning. In other instances, while using a *Learning Walk* protocol in their meetings, the ILDs only asked principals to report "wows" and "wonders" without pushing them to provide evidence of their observations or rationales for identifying certain classroom teaching practices as positive or negative.

Brokering in networks. Dr. Jones bridged the principal network to the assessment office in an effort to capitalize on expertise in that office relevant to a common problem of practice in the network: improving teaching and learning for struggling ELL students. The assessment director did not simply show up and give a perfunctory, generic quarterly departmental report; rather, Jones worked with the director in advance to help tailor (or translate) the presentation for the network principals. Dr. Jones also connected the principals to non-instructional resources. However, she intentionally and strategically limited the amount of network time spent on such matters to brief informational items in the last 15 minutes of the meeting. The latter involved substantial work on Dr. Jones' part to communicate with other central office administrators about why she was denying their request to address her principals directly and otherwise take up network meeting time with issues she did not see as central to their focus and which could be covered with a handout. In network meetings run by some other ILDs, time became consumed with presentations by other central office administrators about central office mandates. Notice, too, that in presenting the new policy about how to file for a curriculum exemption, Jones did not simply reiterate the central office policy. Rather, she "translated" the new policy by peppering her presentation with specific advice about how her principals might have particular success in securing a waiver.

Creating opportunities for all principals to participate in their network as resources. Dr. Jones involved Ms. Rosario, the host principal, in leading key substantive parts of the meeting, showcasing her particular strengths in working with English language learners. Dr. Jones similarly used network meetings at other schools and work with host principals in advance to feature strong or promising practice at each network school and how each principal might serve as a resource for other principals in the network. As the comments from the principals in the case above suggest, such a strategy successfully identified Ms. Rosario as a network resource: other principals asked if the ILD could create further opportunities for the visiting principals to learn from Ms. Rosario. At the same time, the meeting process Jones and Rosario co-designed did not stop at "show and tell"; rather, the principal focused her visiting colleagues' classroom observations on aspects of her school she aimed to improve, thereby putting her own school and her instructional leadership practice on display. In this way, the visiting colleagues were invited not just to listen passively and perhaps share stories of how they shared her struggles, but to become co-investigators in the work of improvement, with the assumption that all of the principals in the network were capable of providing her with some useful advice.

Jones also intentionally grouped her principals into pairs during one portion of the meeting to match principals with particular strengths and needs. As Jones commented, such strategies were "just like organizing a classroom" where you differentiate groups of students in particular ways, depending on the activity, to provide members opportunities to teach and learn from others. Other ILDs, who were less adept at engaging all principals as a resource to each other. regularly identified the same principals as always high or low performing, sometimes suggesting that certain principals could just as well sit-out certain network activities, rather than distinguishing how certain principals had strengths in different domains and reinforcing the importance of all principals participating in network activities. Other ILDs rarely if ever called on principals to exercise leadership within their networks.

Summary

In sum, despite the different histories and conditions in our three focal central offices, all three organized their central office transformation efforts around new relationships with school principals focused on strengthening principals' instructional leadership. All three systems created new central office positions specifically focused on such support. How these ILDs went about their work varied in ways that, based on both prior research and study data, would make it more or less likely for them to positively influence principals' practice. ***Certain ILD practices seemed particularly promising for strengthening principals' instructional leadership: consistent differentiation of support for individual principals, modeling ways of thinking and acting consistent with principals' instructional leadership, and using tools and brokering resources. Creating opportunities for principals in networks to serve as learning resources for each other also appeared promising.***

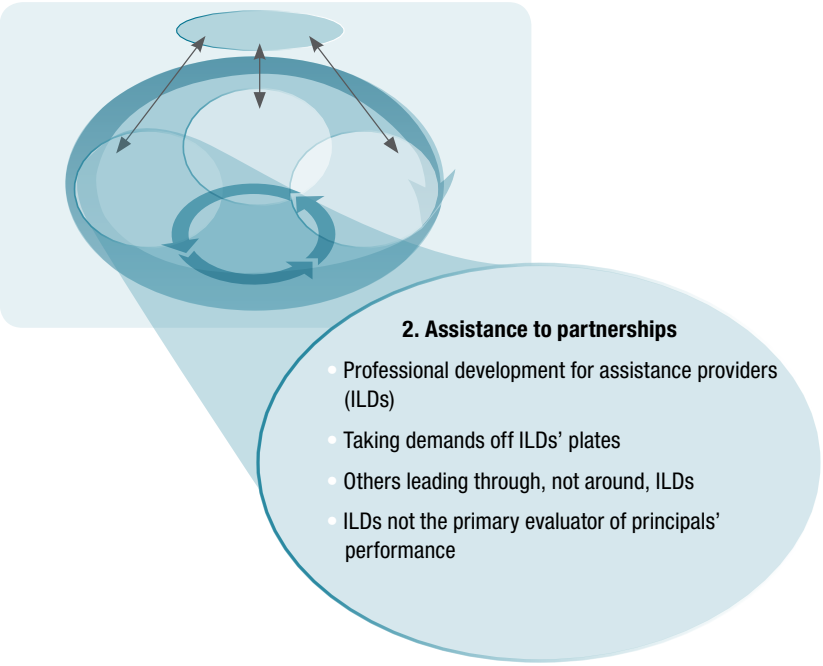
However, these ILDs did not go it alone. We found that their ability to engage in this work with individual school principals and principal networks depended on support from other central office administrators. We explore such support in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3

Dimension 2: Assistance to the Central Office–Principal Partnerships

Research on learning underscores that people, such as the instructional leadership directors or ILDs, help others such as school principals improve the quality of their work not only when they assist the learners with those work practices but when they, too, receive assistance with their own work. Some learning theorists call this dynamic *nested assistance relationships* to capture the importance of assistance providers getting help with their own work assisting others (e.g., Tharp & Gallimore, 1991). Accordingly, we analyzed our data for evidence of support the ILDs received that seemed to matter to how they worked with principals on their instructional leadership. Four supports, summarized schematically in Figure 3, were promising in this regard.

Figure 3. Dimension 2: Direct Assistance to Principals' Instructional Leadership Practice



More and less promising supports for ILDs' work reflected the extent to which other central office administrators (1) engaged the ILDs in challenging conversations about their own work with individual school principals and how to improve the quality of that work, or (2) helped ILDs maximize the time they spent on sup-

port for principals' instructional leadership. Here, we put together observations of central office administrators' work with ILDs' descriptions of these matters. To establish that the ILDs were indeed maximizing time with principals, we asked principals about the frequency of their interactions with their ILDs and reviewed a random sample of ILDs' calendars, as part of interviews, three times over the course of the study period. While we were not able to associate particular supports for ILDs with specific assistance practices described in Chapter 2, the following four supports seemed essential to helping ILDs work with principals on their instructional leadership at even a basic level:

- *Professional development for ILDs* that provided regular opportunities for challenging conversations about the quality of their work with school principals and how to improve it.
- *Taking issues and other demands off ILDs' plates,* thereby freeing up their time to work with principals on principals' instructional leadership.
- *Leading through—rather than around—the ILDs,* and otherwise supporting the leadership of ILDs, vis-à-vis principals' instructional leadership.
- *Developing and using an accountability system* in which ILDs did not act as the sole agents holding principals accountable for improvements in student performance.

Professional Development for Instructional Leadership Directors (ILDs)

Central office administrators in all three districts brought ILDs together in meetings ostensibly to help strengthen the ILDs' work with individual school principals.[15] In Atlanta these occasions happened as part of weekly meetings with the deputy superintendent, and in New York City and Oakland, ILDs came together twice each month in meetings at least partially dedicated to support for ILDs' practice. ***These meetings, among other forms of professional development, gave ILDs a forum for examining their work with principals, and considering how to improve it.***

[15] Interestingly, none of the professional supports for ILDs that we documented in any of our sites focused on how ILDs engage their principals in networks. One New York City network leader told us that professional development sessions the year prior to our data collection had addressed how to convene principals in networks but we did not observe similar conversations during the subsequent year. All the professional supports we captured were geared toward informing or otherwise supporting how ILDs worked with individual principals.

However, the time other central office administrators actually dedicated to ILDs' professional development was sometimes shortened or completely interrupted when other central office administrators shifted meeting agendas to address other, usually operational issues. Nor did all the professional development opportunities engage the ILDs in challenging conversations about the quality of their work with school principals and how to improve it. Not surprisingly, when their professional development time was shortened or not characterized by such challenging conversations, ILDs tended to report that the professional development they received did not help them improve the quality of their work with school principals.

New York City/Empowerment Schools Organization (ESO) stood out among our three sites for the amount of time actually dedicated to network leaders' professional development and specifically to challenging conversations among them about how to improve the quality of their work with individual school principals. We observed almost 100 hours of twice-monthly network leader meetings that typically featured a significant amount of time on what some referred to as network leaders' "inquiry." Sometimes these inquiry sessions focused on ideas senior central office administrators brought in from the outside, as when staff dedicated over an hour to network leaders' engagement with a school principal about how he was able to change his schools' culture in ways supportive of gains in student achievement, or when ESO leaders hosted a retreat for half their network leaders with organizational change expert Peter Senge. More frequently, the staff provided network leaders with a prompt related to how they were handling certain situations, such as making accountability demands meaningful to principals or getting principals to trust their feedback.

For example, in the following exchange, a small group of network leaders responded to a prompt about one challenge they were facing in their work with school principals and how to address it. Network leader 1 introduced the problem of how to help principals understand what it means to exercise instructional leadership.

> *Network Leader 1:* How can I make that [focus on principals' instructional leadership] actionable?
>
> *Network Leader 3:* [What I look at is] what are the different opportunities I can have with [principals] that will gain their trust, so I can have some influence? If that's what your goal is. I think you almost have to go backward and have a set of

> experiences that aren't so high stakes, so that when high stakes experiences arise, [the principals] trust you.
>
> *Network Leader 2:* But there's no guarantee. But I hear underneath what you're saying that you want some assurance [that the principal is going to engage in work with you on improving their instructional leadership]. The desire to be influential is partly rooted in belief that when we are confronted with situations we offer what we know is right, and when [principals] don't take [our] advice, we are hurt.
>
> *Network Leader 1:* … I'm worried about [principal's name] and his school … .
>
> *Network Leader 3:* What's the work with this person? Because it seems to me this is someone who needs to feel he comes to decisions himself. How can you frame this so he feels he is coming to decisions on his own … . You have to take a tack … so you can meet [principals where they are] …
>
> *Network Leader 1:* Have you gained that respect from your principals in a year and three months?
>
> *Network Leader 3:* The goal is not so much about us gaining credibility, but about their development. It's not really about us.

This exchange is typical of the conversations we observed in its focus on a specific challenge these ILDs were facing and their grappling with how they might take action on those challenges. New York had staff specifically dedicated to professional learning for the network leaders and other ESO staff. One of the staff reported that the job included "to continually protect the space of the network leader meetings for them to talk … [about their own learning]."

Some network leaders, especially those who had been in the original Autonomy Zone, reported that they did not see the need for the meetings and that they just wanted to work with their team members and their schools. However, the majority of network leaders we interviewed typically corroborated the value of these conversations, especially given the dynamic and largely uncharted nature of their work. For instance, one reported,

> I think [the network leader meetings] have contributed to how we operate and understand the role that I'm performing now. We continue to have clarity, although it changed from time to time. We were looking at being facilitators but we were also being looked at as being knowledge-able educators to influence decisions of principals.

Half the network leaders we interviewed reported that they facilitated such conversations for themselves by meeting with their colleagues either during or outside of network meetings. Accordingly, we viewed these ILDs as main agents of their own professional support. Similarly, in Atlanta at the time of our data collection, School Reform Team (SRT) executive directors convened in monthly meetings to share ideas and materials that they found useful in their work with principals. As one executive director reflected, "We meet once a month … . We all meet and talk about issues that are common to us and we share some ideas so that's helpful … . I always need some learning supports [like those]." These and other executive directors emphasized that occasionally these meetings involved not simply the sharing of materials but extended conversations about how they were actually working with their principals.

By contrast, the biweekly meetings in Oakland that we observed infrequently focused directly on NExOs' work with principals on their instructional leadership. On a few occasions, the meeting facilitator led these ILDs through a "consultancy protocol" that prompted one NExO to present the case of one school for feedback from ILD colleagues. However, those presentations tended to focus on the performance of the school with some discussion of the performance of the principal, and remarkably little discussion of how the NExO might support the principal. The short time for conversation allowed in that particular consultancy protocol curtailed critical conversations about the ILDs' work with their schools, a sharp contrast to the more flexible, open-ended discussions among network leaders in New York City.

The NExOs received feedback on their work from senior central office staff mainly in the form of annual performance evaluations and through comments on how they completed various tools and rubrics. Our reviews of the tools and rubrics suggested they addressed the topic of NExOs' work with and their knowledge of schools but did not penetrate deeply into matters of their practice. One senior central office staff member in Oakland described supporting NExOs this way:

> … they've been working on drafts [of their plans to support principals] and then I've been giving feedback on the drafts … . I'm basing my feedback on can they show the integration of the strategic practices, how does it connect to raising student achievement and meeting the student achievement targets, how does it leverage the small network model … and then how are they including mandatory elements in the plan … . And they are investing significant time and really build-

> ing out their plans in much more detail, which is because they should be putting that kind of thought into it.

NExOs typically reported that this emphasis on documenting on paper how their plans for principals aligned with district priorities significantly took their time away from work in schools and did not contribute positively to the quality of that work. Perhaps as a result, the elementary school NExOs eventually met on their own to share their work and plan jointly together. Likewise, they convened themselves with an outside facilitator to receive professional support.

Taking Issues and Competing Demands off ILDs' Plates

Though ILDs were supposed to focus their work on supporting principals' instructional leadership, as mentioned earlier, various demands and distractions impinged on ILDs' time and took them out of schools and away from work with principals. ***The central office–principal partnerships were assisted by intentional efforts of central office administrators, including ILDs themselves, to remove responsibilities or tasks that would make it harder for ILDs to maximize the time they spent helping principals exercise instructional leadership.***

In Atlanta, the SRT executive directors frequently credited various central office staff, including their deputy, with helping them in this regard. As one recounted,

> … We had blackout days, right, and the blackout days were equivalent to one and a half days a week. And the blackout means that you don't pull principals, you don't pull school executive directors … because people are in schools working. And so … the school EDs asked for that time to be increased and it was increased to two and a half [blackout days per week], and basically our position was it's a very poor commentary if this is our core business and we are only having blackout for less than half of the time [in the workweek]. And so [the deputy] was like, 'You're absolutely right. Two and a half days.'

Senior central office administrators were particularly instrumental in protecting ILDs' time for work with principals when they reduced demands on ILDs that either threatened to consume too much time or that otherwise did not promise to strengthen ILDs' support for principals' instructional leadership. For example, one such central office administrator in Atlanta reported,

> I know I make a special effort when EDs call me or … when principals call or the ED has a principal call me … I try to make sure they get what they need as

> quickly as they can, because the bottom line is providing service to schools. That's it. That's it.

Another senior central office administrator staff person in Atlanta reported that the job of the executive director is to support schools and get schools what they need, but when these ILDs run up against barriers "and when they've exhausted … everything, they come to me and I take care of it." Strikingly, every single network leader we interviewed in New York City repeatedly reported that any time they brought a challenging issue to the attention of senior staff people in the Empowerment Schools Organization, these staff either provided information that was needed to expedite the issue or handled the issue themselves. All these ILDs reported that these efforts on the part of senior staff helped them increase the time they spent working with school principals on their instructional leadership.

By contrast, some Oakland NExOs reported canceling meetings with individual principals, especially in the spring, due to personnel hearings or "fire drills," urgent meetings back at the main central office building generally not related to their efforts to support principals' instructional leadership. NExOs also reported having much of their time consumed by "homework assignments" from the senior central office staff, such as templates for recording all their schools' assessment data and data on professional learning communities and family engagement, among others. One reported that, as a required part of the new accountability system, they had to give multiple presentations on their schools to executive staff during the fall of our data collection period because so many were on the list of low performing schools. When asked how, if at all, such "red school presentations" related to their own work with principals on instructional leadership, NExOs generally reported that the presentations kept them in compliance with the accountability system but did not contribute to their work with principals.

ILDs also took the initiative to protect their own time. As an Atlanta executive director reported, "I've learned to say no when other demands threaten my time with principals." NExOs in Oakland likewise reported that they committed to spend at least 75 percent of their time working with school principals, and would also collectively resist attempts by district senior staff to load them up with other demands or take over too much of their twice-monthly meeting time for issues not related to improving principals' instructional leadership. In all three districts, ILDs protected their own time, in part, by delegating certain matters not directly related to instructional leadership to their staff or other central office administrators who

assisted them. Even in Oakland, where NExOs did not have team members like their counterparts in the other two districts, several reported, and observations confirmed, that they delegated certain issues to their administrators-on-special-assignment or to staff of other units who agreed to work with their networks in ways that freed up their time to focus on principals' instructional leadership. However, some also reported not saying no often enough when other central office administrators placed demands on their time, for example, to review the district's plan for getting off Program Improvement status. Some NExOs admitted they wanted to have influence over decisions within the central office and, in order to do so, they had to attend various planning meetings even though those meetings lessened the time they spent with principals.

Leading Through, Not Around, the ILDs

Another key support for ILDs included what we call "leading through the ILDs." That is, ***based on a shared conception of the nature of the ILDs' role vis-à-vis the principal, other central office administrators and board members did not circumvent the ILDs and work directly with principals, but through their actions reinforced the ILDs' essential role in supporting principals' instructional leadership development***. ILDs generally pointed to such efforts as essential to their ability to work well with school principals, in part, by increasing their confidence that they were trusted and valued. When other central office administrators did not engage in such activities, ILDs generally reported spending time dealing with the resulting confusion and noted how the lack of reinforcement for their work undermined their relationships with some school principals.

One senior central office staff person in Atlanta described the importance of leading through, not around, the ILDs in this way,

> The cultural shift [involved in central office transformation is] for central office to become facilitators of the schools. Well, actually the … shift now is more of the central office supporting the EDs [executive directors] of schools, who in turn will provide support for the schools. Prior to that you had the EDs doing stuff for schools, you had central office doing stuff for schools, and in many instances they were both doing the same thing. You might have professional development doing professional development for principals, and the EDs doing professional development for the principals … . So you get kind of confused.

As a result, principals did not know whom to call when they needed professional support, and that this lack of clarity occasionally undermined the executive directors' efforts to support principals. This respondent and others in Atlanta credited consensus that the executivedirectors' role was to be the main point person for principals as fundamental to supporting the executive directors' work and the central office's ability to support principals in coordinated ways.

In Atlanta, executive directors frequently reported that senior central office staff trusted them to do their work, and that trust provided further evidence of "leading through the ILDs". For example, when we asked what if any supports they received for their work with principals, one described in a typical comment,

> What I really enjoy is that the leadership trusted [me]. And my leadership that allowed me to do the work I needed to do without [their] hanging all over me and just expected the result. That's all I really need.

Describing a key lesson they learned over time, two senior staff people noted that they cannot do everything and that effective executive leadership in a system that supports teaching and learning improvement helps point people, the executive directors, do their job well. In contrast, early in the implementation of the Atlanta transformation process, principals went directly to senior staff. Now, principals are sent back to an executive director, as one executive director noted:

> If principals go to [a senior staff person] … she] tells them things like 'come to me'. I know it's my job for them not to come to her because if they go to her I haven't done what I am supposed to do. She will always send them back here generally … . I'll tell you that's the model from the top … None of us have time to get into the business of dealing with issues that other departments are existing to handle. So it's a model from the top. This system is probably the most protocol and communication-driven system I've ever seen in my life. … I think before Dr. Hall got here there was a lot of monkeying around with the staff and board members … They tell me board members would come in, tell principals what to do, directing principals …

This ILD went on to describe how that kind of dynamic with board members has been significantly minimized in Atlanta through greater clarity about the executive directors' role and consistent modeling by senior staff that the central office (and board) leads through the executive directors in supporting principals. This person reflected that there's no memo describing the chain of command but "it is understood."

ILDs obviously struggled when other central office administrators went around them or dealt directly with principals in these ways, further reinforcing how such challenges may throw up typical roadblocks for districts early in the implementation of a central office transformation effort. In one example, corroborated by multiple interviews and observations, senior central office staff in Oakland advised NExOs that several of their schools should be closed due to poor performance. The NExOs made a public presentation to the board with those recommendations and were met with resistance by community members, a typical response to decisions to close schools. Several weeks later the acting state administrator announced with little explanation that the schools would remain open. As NExOs saw it, such apparent "reversals" created confusion about their role and significantly undermined their work with principals. Several NExOs reported that they were often confused themselves about the nature of their responsibilities. In a typical comment, one reported, that when hired,

> We were told we would be like the superintendent of our own little district and the word that … [was] used … . [Then later, senior staff said] 'I know we told you all you were like area superintendents or assistant superintendents, but you are not. That is not how it turned out to be.'

This person went on to describe that when they were hired they were "running our own show" with principals, and that at the end of the year senior staff would look at their results and either keep them or fire them. However, over time, their job shifted so that at the time of the interview they described their job as one in which senior staff were "constantly bombarding us with homework assignments."

By the end of our data collection, there was still a palpable ambivalence about the role of NExOs, including significant debates about whether or not Oakland should continue to have staff serve in this role, especially given the reportedly high cost of the model.

The System, Not Solely the ILDs, Holding Principals Accountable for Improving School Performance

ILDs also occasionally had their time consumed by participation in the system-wide accountability system, even in New York City where network leaders did not formally evaluate school principals. As noted above in the discussion of tools, ILDs sometimes participated in the accountability system in ways that focused on strengthening principals' instructional leadership. In other instances, their partici-

pation seemed to interrupt or compromise the time they spent with their school principals on instructional matters.

For instance, network leaders in New York City all unanimously reported that one essential support for their work with principals on their instructional leadership was their charge to support, and *not* to evaluate, principals. They indicated that, in effect, "the data" held principals accountable for their performance. (Formal responsibility for annual performance evaluations of principals fell to the state-mandated community school superintendents, who, as part of central office transformation, no longer oversaw sub-district central offices but retained the authority to formally evaluate principals). As network leaders saw it, the separation of personnel evaluation from support meant that they could focus on supporting principals in ways that benefited their relationships with the school leaders and their focus on principal capacity building. The arrangement also signaled to principals that the network leaders were a different form of central office support from that available prior to central office transformation. As one network leader described in a typical comment, their work in some respects resembled an instructionally oriented supervisory role under the old regional central office structure called local instructional superintendent. Now,

> The major difference … you're not the supervisor. So we probably perform a lot of the same functions, but that tension or that layer of 'I'm coming in and I'm your supervisor' and that power—whether or not that person had the personality—that power is always there … . [Now] folks can really feel comfortable saying certain things … asking certain questions that might be … on the edge or pushing the envelope … Whereas in the past, they got roiled in firepower and judgment.

In the two other districts, ILDs were as unanimous that their responsibility to conduct formal performance evaluations of principals and otherwise participate centrally in activities designed to hold schools accountable for student performance benefitted their work with their principals. These ILDs reported that having such positional authority over principals helped them exert more influence over principals' practice. However, in Oakland, time for supporting principals' instructional leadership was significantly compromised by time spent on activities related to principal evaluation, such as doing site plan reviews and other activities with schools that might be closing or that were performing poorly. One central office administrator in Oakland confided that often principals call him for advice rather than their NExO. When asked why, this person reflected,

> I'm not their supervisor, so I can truly offer pure support and sometimes it's just a confidential ear even where people will just say "Hey, I'm having a really hard time." I mean it'll take all forms. "I'm having a really hard time, can you just listen. I have this PD session later today, can you help me think of a warm-up or here's my agenda, what do you think?'

This person elaborated that they thought the "power dynamic" of NExOs evaluating principals

> … gets in the way for a lot of people … . I just know it does, having done a lot of leadership training and work and research. I mean the whole notion of evaluation and supervision—while I do believe it can be done—I mean a supervisor can find that balance, it's very difficult. And Oakland, one of the biggest challenges we have in this district is trust and there's a lot of people, and that's across the organization—teachers, staff people, classified, custodians—you name it. People have felt burned, and so the lack of trust. So when a NExO turns to someone and says "Look, I'm here to support you. I'm not here to ding you," they're like, "Well, but look at my evaluation last time—you totally dinged me." And the NExOs say that about their bosses, and their bosses say it about the board, and the teachers say it about the principals.

However, in Atlanta ILDs did not report or demonstrate that holding principals accountable for results interfered with their ability to support principals. Based largely on central office administrators' reports, we attributed this difference in part to evidence that the system ultimately held principals responsible for their low performance through mechanisms that did not consume executive directors' time. As one explained these systemic supports for principal accountability,

> When I came here [to interview for this job] … I asked … "So what happens when you've got principals who are not performing?' You know, [you] work with them, develop them, try to build capacity, [but] they just don't have it. They're the typical mentality of a manager—not leadership, no instructional skills, all about keeping the building clean and the kids quiet. What do you do with those people?" I think my question was "Where do they go?" And she [the executive central office administrator] looked at me and she said "They go home [i.e., they are fired]" I remember thinking, "They go home? They go home!"

A district-wide accountability tool called the "Balanced Score Card" functioned as a key device for distributing responsibility for principal accountability across

the central office in Atlanta. The superintendent and executive cabinet used a set of common indicators to differentiate performance targets for individual schools. These indicators—including student performance data on tests and common district assessments, attendance and graduation data—were used to evaluate the work in individual schools and the nature of central office support for schools, and to reestablish the next round of targets based on evidence of change over time.

Summary

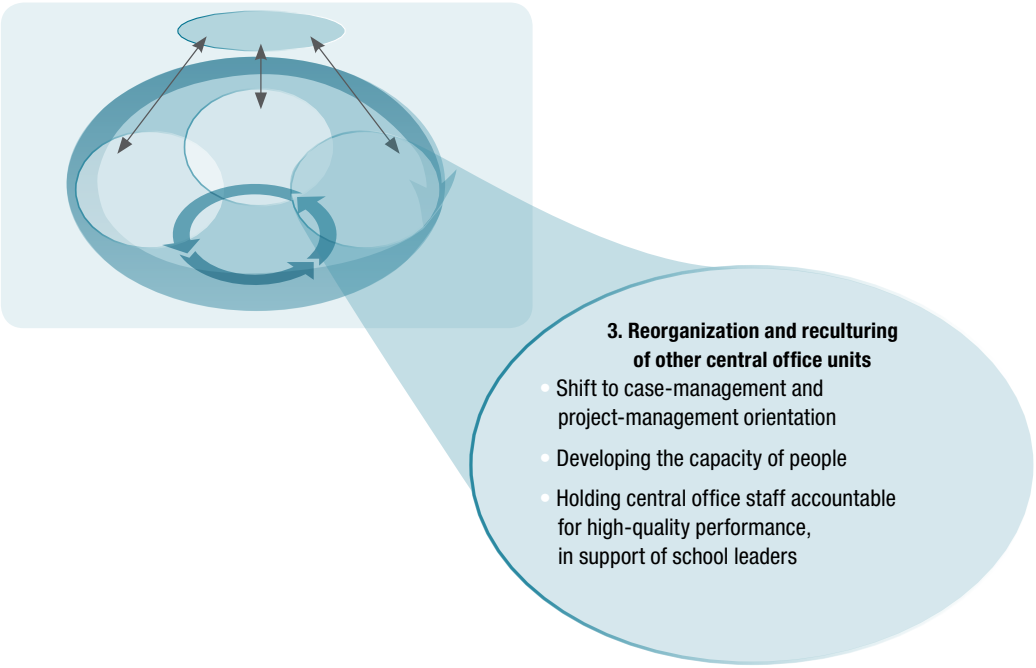
We argued in this chapter that particular supports for the ILDs engaged them in challenging conversations about the nature and quality of their work with school principals and helped them increase the time they spent with school principals specifically focused on principals' instructional leadership. ***In short, the central office supported ILDs' work with principals through particular forms of professional development, as well as efforts by the ILDs and others to remove distractions, protect their time for instructionally-focused work, and limit the burden of holding principals' accountable for school performance when this burden did not promise to build principals' instructional leadership capacity.***

CHAPTER 4

Dimension 3: Reorganizing and Reculturing All Other Central Office Units to Support Teaching and Learning Improvement

Our discussion in previous chapters has honed in on how central office transformation involves, first of all, central office administrators (ILDs) dedicated to working with individual school principals and networks of school principals to improve their instructional leadership practice. Second, we noted that direct support to those assistance providers seemed essential to their ability to carry out their work at a basic level of quality. In tandem with these developments, a third dimension of central office transformation, schematically shown in Figure 4 below, complemented the first two dimensions: staff in other units throughout the central offices (e.g., budget, human resources, and facilities) worked to significantly change their own professional practice to support teaching and learning improvement in schools, directly or indirectly.

Figure 4. Dimension 3: Reorganization and Reculturing All Central Office Units



This picture of what other central office administrators were doing is based on multiple interviews with such administrators about the nature of their daily work, corroborated by reports of three different respondents or at least three different data sources (e.g., an interview, documents, and observations). We considered activities promising for focusing other central office units on teaching-and-learning support if central office administrators could (1) provide an explicit rationale or explanation for why specific reorganization and reculturing activities mattered to teaching and learning improvement in schools, or (2) demonstrate that the reorganizing and reculturing activities had resulted in additional teaching and learning resources in schools (such as freeing up principals' time for instructional leadership). Through this process we identified three sets of activities involved with reorganizing and reculturing all central office units to support teaching and learning improvement:

- *Shifting the practice of central office administrators across central office units to personalize services* through "case management" and focus on problem-solving through "project management."
- *Developing the capacity of people throughout the central office* to support teaching and learning improvement.
- *Holding central office administrators accountable for high-quality performance*, especially it relates to the quality of support provided to school leaders.

We refer to these activities as "reorganizing" because they involved a realignment and reform of formal central office structures such as the nature of positions within each unit and reporting lines throughout the central office. But these changes also focused centrally on "reculturing" or penetrating how people actually went about their work and related to schools. The three school districts did not engage in such reorganizing and reculturing of all their central office units all at once. Rather, they phased in unit involvement over a series of years. In this chapter we concentrate on reorganizing and reculturing efforts that were underway during the study period.

Shifting to Case and Project Management for Teaching and Learning Improvement

A hallmark of our three transforming districts' change efforts involved the reorganization of central office units to personalize school principals' experience with different central office units and to focus central office administrators on addressing particular problems. Prior to central office transformation, many of these units

were organized with staff assigned to deliver particular services to all or large groups of schools, and to deliver these services in a relatively one-size-fits-all manner. *Under transformation, individual central office staff members specialized in particular schools, not services, and were assigned to address whatever needs arose in those schools across their department; likewise, staff were assigned to cross-unit project teams that addressed particular problems or challenges related to school support that did not fit neatly within any one central office unit.*

Structural changes such as the assignment of schools to staff and the formation of cross-unit teams created necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for those central office staff to actually work differently with schools, serve schools better, and engage school leaders in ways that supported their teaching and learning improvement efforts. *More consequential to shifts in the practice of central office administrators across all three central offices were efforts to help staff develop case and project management approaches to their work.*

The shift to a case management approach. We use the term *case management* to refer to efforts to help central office administrators work closely with individual schools to understand their goals, identify barriers to teaching and learning improvement in schools, and address those barriers, even if they fell beyond the purview of their particular central office units. Respondents in all three systems sometimes referred to such changes as involving a "customer service" orientation to central office work. But, as one central office administrator elaborated,

> It's not some touchy feely thing … . [P]eople think customer service training is like, "Oh, let's be all nice to each other"… but it's not. It's about learning about the dynamics of what it means to be a customer and then how you keep that customer.

This respondent went on to explain that organizations keep customers in part when they know their customers well and develop and provide services that customers value and that help customers realize their goals.

In an example from Atlanta that captures this distinction between traditional central office work and working with a case-management orientation, multiple central office staff and school principals described how, prior to central office transformation, staff in the human resources (HR) unit mainly specialized in different aspects of the hiring process such as processing new teacher applications for all schools, with little attention to individual schools or how the work of the HR unit

might support teaching and learning improvement in specific schools. Through the central office transformation process, HR staff shifted their work over time so that schools had a central office "generalist" assigned to them to help with human resources needs; importantly, the generalists worked to shift their fundamental orientation to their work from one focused on, "How can I deliver particular services to all schools?" to one centered on school-specific questions such as: "Who are the principals in the schools I am responsible for? What are these school principals and their staff trying to do to improve teaching and learning? What kinds of staff do they need and what can I do to help them recruit, hire, and retain those candidates?" One central office administrator described this shift as the HR generalists "know every school's HR issues, what type of teachers they're looking for, who's left, who's coming, who's pregnant." Another corroborated, by indicating that schools …

> … have the HR generalist and that person knows their schools inside and out. How many teachers they need, where they need them, what their reforms are about. So when they go out to recruit they say, "Well you know, school A has IB [an International Baccalaureate program]. School B has SFA [Success for All]. So if you're interested in a more scripted approach, here's SFA. If you're more open and fluid approach, here's IB." They know it.

These shifts have not been without their challenges. Principals reported numerous examples of phone calls to human resources not being returned. Central office staff acknowledged this problem and generally characterized it as a growing pain: as the human resources unit came to provide higher quality service to school principals, staff faced increasing demands from principals for assistance. At the end of our study period, central office administrators were in the process of considering how to increase the staff of the HR unit to improve the timeliness of response.

One way New York City leaders addressed these burdens on HR staff through a similar redesign process was by separating out HR "transactions"—the routine interactions between school staff and central office human resources personnel that did not necessarily require customer service or even staff to handle them (if they could be automated). Separating these transactions from strategy or problem solving that did require specialized expertise freed up some central office HR staff to work with principals on school-specific issues and challenges in a case management fashion. As one described,

> … historically, HR managers have tended to say to schools "No" or "Here's the 52 forms you have to fill out and if you jump through all these hoops, completely to my satisfaction, then 'yes.'" … What's evolving right now is taking this huge transactional burden off of them and putting it into this HR service center. And then … we'll really build the customer service culture as well as the tools and technology for these people to be effective … . And right now if you were to ask three HR Partners what's the policy around returning from maternity leave if you've taking more than eight months, I suspect you'd get multiple answers because it's just not easy to know, right. So in that sense, we have hired some new people to be these HR Partners and we've hired, in theory, some of the best of the old, but we're really just in the beginning of evolving their job description and taking out the stuff that could be done more mechanically and building the customer service …

Taking a project management approach. In tandem with the development of the case management focus throughout the central office, staff in all three of our systems, to varying degrees, also took a project management approach to their work. Project management[16], in broad terms, called on central office administrators to shift their work from delivering services that they controlled to taking responsibility for work projects and marshaling resources from throughout and sometimes beyond the central office to address them. Through this approach, central office staff were not given discrete tasks to carry out but rather specific problems they had to figure out how to address. As a leader in New York City described such processes, first …

> … you had to have a way of conceptualizing work in smaller pieces. Even though it might have been a very big or systemic kind of [problem], you had to begin to conceptualize it in smaller pieces and call them "projects" so that they had a definable goal or outcome, and that they would be time-bound and budget-bound. So it's like nothing magic. It's just educators hadn't necessarily been doing that that way … . And that [process] basically is a core group of experts [i.e. staff from throughout the central office] … who are deliberately put to a table to solve a problem under the guise of a project. And their time is outlined, their time is secured … . And so … [participants] … as a part of his or her work, has unique time dedicated to support that project. So it's not "Yeah, I'll try to get to the meeting." Or "When are you going to schedule that? Tuesday's not good for

[16] In governmental reform efforts, such an approach to change is sometimes called the "new public management" (e.g., Barzelay, 1992).

> me." And that kind of thing. There is a charter that outlines the elements of the project. Subject area experts that are needed to help think about and conceptualize the benchmarks and deliverables. To develop the timelines, do the work, and then they meet at a unique set of times. Then their performance on that team gets channeled back to their administrative agent or supervisor or whatever.

This shift to project management reflected a recognition, expressed by one central office administrator in Atlanta, that when a central office shifts its focus from delivering services to truly solving problems, staff begin to see that they have to work with their colleagues in more integrated and collaborative ways than they had in the past,

> No one department can accomplish anything by themselves. Even HR—they need technology, they need finance. You all need us to get it to the board. So we all kind of need each other and so why don't we get together on a project team and figure out how to do it together. … We're in the beginning stages of really solidifying that as a way of work. And it has been, I must say, the most effective way in which we are beginning to get buy-in from people at the central office. What we found is that people really like to collaborate with other people. And it has been amazing the problems that we have been able to at least identify.

The creation of the operations support unit in Oakland provides one example of how project management called on central office staff to solve problems, even if responsibility for those problems and promising solutions did not fall neatly within any one central office unit. Central office leaders launched this unit in 2005 in direct response to a problem with how the central office worked with schools. Demands to manage operational issues were keeping many principals from focusing on teaching and learning improvement, not only because of the sheer number of demands, but also because schools did not have efficient systems or staff in place to manage those demands. As the central office began its central office transformation effort and began to emphasize the importance of principals focusing on instructional improvement, central office leaders realized that the approach, as one said, "places a lot of emphasis on [other school staff] as … the operational manager [of the school]. The reality is most of our schools do not have support staff that can function at that level." Building the capacity of school-based administrators other than the principal to manage various non-instructional school operations did not fall neatly into any one long-standing central office unit. Nor did staff in those units typically have current capacity to help schools with their

myriad non-instructional demands. To address this problem, central office leaders convened a project management team consisting of some new and veteran central office employees around the problem of how to provide operations support to schools. Rather than tinkering within the central office's traditional departments, team members asked more fundamentally what kinds of support they could provide to schools to address that challenge. The result, Operations Support, brought together 12 staff people from within and outside the central office to help build more effective systems for handling various operational functions.

In practice, when the unit was up and running, Operations Support staff applied case and project management foci to their work. Within that new unit, ten "operations coaches" worked directly with schools to address site-specific issues (i.e., case management) while two other staff people took on "Homerun Projects," lines of work within the central office that, if improved, promised to dramatically increase principals' time spent on teaching and learning improvement (i. e., project management). At the time of our study, "Homerun projects" included the management of a cross-unit team to improve the efficiency of the payroll function within the central office, work with custodial services to develop better central office systems for keeping schools clean, and reforms within the human resources department to improve the rate at which they provided substitutes for schools with teacher absences or vacancies. As one central office administrator described the identification of those Homerun projects,

> So last year there was a … retreat [with staff from throughout the central office]. And … [the central office leader facilitating the discussion] … had,like ,I think ten issues up on the board that are things that people commonly hear and said, "If we were really able to make a huge difference in five issues, what would the five issues be?"

The Oakland principals we interviewed were unanimous in naming Operations Support as the part of the central office that provided them with vital supports for addressing their challenges and freeing up their time for focusing on teaching and learning improvement. Operations Support also received consistently high marks on district-administered surveys of principals' satisfaction with central office services.

The reform of the human resources unit in Atlanta also resulted from a project management process over several years aimed at addressing inefficiencies in how staff of that unit worked with schools as one strategy for improving teaching and

learning. As one participant in these processes in Atlanta described the evolution of the project management focus in HR,

> So I had, with … members of the HR team and customer focus groups looked at five of our processes … . And when we looked at their process it took 21 people to get some of our real basic processes accomplished. So then we decided okay, if we change our process, that's going to bring about some new roles and responsibilities … . So what we decided to do is assign a generalist to a [SRT] feeder pattern. So then you [the generalist] had the relationship with that executive director and those principals, … a better understanding of the culture of each school… [and] SRT executive directors. And could then better support the schools. We did a pilot with one of our feeder patterns … . We got positive feedback. So we went to a rolling implementation …

Atlanta stood out in our data for the remarkable consistency with which respondents described the explicit connection between the work of the project management teams and teaching and learning improvement: that through project management, Atlanta central office leaders aimed to help all employees understand their work as consequential, directly or indirectly, to increasing the time and other resources available for teaching and learning improvement in schools. Early in the central office transformation effort, district leaders conducted discussion groups with central office employees to raise their awareness of the central office transformation effort and convey that this teaching and learning improvement initiative would have a significant impact on their work. Executive leadership then required everyone throughout the central office, as one described, to

> … sit down and figure out how their job related to student achievement. Each one of us had to do that. And it was very difficult for some people on my staff. I remember my secretary said "Well, I don't have anything to do with it." I said, "Well if you don't, then go home … Go home and think about it and come back." And so she did and she says "Well, you know, I did do the [coordination of resources for the school board], and if I don't do it well ,then the board gets mad and maybe they won't approve something that the school needs." Bingo—there you go … . That's our first business: How do we make ourselves relevant to schools.

As another central office administrator put it,

> When an employee goes to work [in a school], [that school employee has] a lot of things run through [their] mind. If we assist those employees [we] … relieve them

> of a lot of their pressure so that they can go back into the schools and concentrate on the main focus of the students. We're here for the students. So if we can assist them and accommodate them as much as we can to relieve that stress and that tension, they can devote their time to teaching the kids and learning them, so we're here to assist and provide a service to the employees.

Across multiple examples of such efforts in Atlanta, we found that central office staff most commonly understood their work as related to teaching and learning in schools in one or two ways: If they conducted their work at a high level of quality then (1) school staff would not have to spend as much time as they had in the past dealing with delays in the delivery of services or problems associated with central office functions performed poorly, and therefore have more time to focus on teaching and learning; and (2) services would be provided more efficiently, which would free-up dollars that could them be reallocated to school classrooms. As one central office leader put it,

> The reform is to ensure that … *all* students, not just pockets of students, which is what we've had in the past, … obtain knowledge that allows them to be successful to continue to matriculate through graduation and be college ready … . So that means from an instruction standpoint where [teachers] have the direct contact, they're teaching at a high level to all students regardless. And from an operations standpoint we are doing everything that we possibly can to support the schools in a timely and efficient manner. That we're not wasting our money. That as many of the resources as possible go into the school or supporting schools. That we operate at the most minimal level that we can to be efficient. Which means really analyzing and understanding our needs and that we understand from our operations side that our *only* reason we're existing is to ensure that our schools do well. That is it. There is no other reason. And if you don't buy into that, you need to go work someplace else.

Central office administrators demonstrated that they had realized some cost savings especially in the areas of utilities conservation, preventive maintenance for facilities, and greater efficiencies in the school nutrition program.

Developing the Capacity of People Throughout the Central Office to Support Teaching and Learning Improvement

As the discussion above suggests, the shift to case and project management called for significant changes in how many central office staff accomplished their work. Many had been hired for a different kind of job and were not necessarily ready to adopt a new orientation. Not surprisingly, then, the development of people throughout the central office for this new work was fundamental to actually implementing these changes throughout the central offices. Central office leaders built such human capital by both (1) bringing in new staff who came ready to take the new orientation, and (2) offering particular kinds of professional development to help new and existing staff understand and execute what case and project management demanded.

Restaffing and retraining enabled the reorganization and reculturing of the central office in several ways. First, ***central office leaders aimed to build the central office's human capital for project-management focused on teaching and learning by bringing in new and often non-traditional staff into the central office.*** These newcomers often replaced veteran staff in long-time positions or took on new positions created specifically under the central office transformation effort. For example, a cadre of Broad Fellows worked on a number of special projects throughout the Oakland central office, many of them eventually taking on more permanent positions related to community accountability and the oversight of over 28 "workstreams" or projects to help ensure that they operated in project management fashion. Many of these Fellows had limited educational background but some experience with organizational development and fiscal management generally unavailable in the central office. Oakland's central office leaders also brought on McKinsey & Company, a consulting firm to conduct a "clean sheet" process of fundamentally rethinking the number and nature of central office positions throughout the central office that, in some units, led to the removal of a significant number of staff. As a result, some of the new project and department directors found they had up to fifty to sixty percent of their positions vacant.

Central office administrators identified the removal of staff to free up positions for new staff as essential to execution of the central office work. In the words of one, some people look at turnover in a system and assume that the turnover is negative, the "negative impact of environmental change or structural … change. I just think it's kind of the shake-out that goes on when you're trying to put the right people in the right seats." Another added that getting some staff to change their work in the

ways project management demanded was like trying to "teach a dog to meow" and that no amount of retraining was going to change their practice. An Atlanta staff member argued that being able to bring in new staff was essential to realizing the goals of central office transformation. One director colleague had over 10 vacancies coming into the directorship, which provided that person with …

> … lots of space to create a new structure that he's looking to create. And the [number of] vacancies may not end up being [that many positions]. He may combine some and create ten super positions or eight super positions, but that's part of our design that we were going through … . So, he has the luxury where I came in to almost a fully staffed [team] … didn't have as much room to operate. I think having those vacancies gives you a lot more room to operate and get the skill set that you need to do what you need to do.

Because the Atlanta district is in a right-to-work state, leaders there had more flexibility for firing and hiring personnel than their counterparts in New York City and Oakland, who were bound by union agreements and, in some cases, state mandates that constrained certain positions. Nonetheless, leaders in those other systems generally worked creatively within union agreements and state law to increase their ability to restaff certain positions. For example, in New York City, state law required that community school superintendents evaluate school principals. Under the preceding central office structure, those superintendents also oversaw sub-district units that had been clustered together into large "regional" offices which essentially functioned as the central office for the schools in those geographic areas. Under transformation, system leaders disbanded the regions and replaced them with school support organizations. To comply with state law, community school superintendent retained responsibility for principal evaluation but otherwise had limited authority.[17] In both New York City and Oakland, when central office leaders were unable to remove staff who seemed unable or unwilling to work with the new project-management focus, they generally moved them to positions that required discrete tasks or "transactions" that most staff could carry out, at the very least, at a minimum level of quality.

While some degree of restaffing was obviously necessary for central office transformation, restaffing was hardly sufficient. Ongoing retraining of new

[17] This decision was not without controversy, however, some of which culminated in lawsuits calling for the district to restore statutory authority of the community school superintendents. After the conclusion of our data collection, the chancellor did return certain statutory functions to the community school superintendents but the superintendents no longer oversaw the main school support units of the school district central office.

and existing staff also seemed essential. One Oakland central office administrator captured the dual importance of restaffing and retraining by identifying two approaches to central office reculturing. One is,

> scaring the shit out of people [through downsizing departments and letting staff go]. And then people say, Oh I guess it's a new day … . The other way of doing culture change is to assume the best about the human beings that are in your organization. And … try to help them get engaged in "Why do we need to change?" And build a case for change and bring the people along with you … . [Y]ou have to be strategic about which one you use at which time and in organizational life cycles. So that [downsizing and firing people] … might have been the right thing to start but it had to be followed up fairly quickly by … then how do we make this work? How do we get everyone on board? ... I had to … be the person that said, "Okay we did this big structural change. It's not really working as well as we'd hoped it would work. Principals weren't feeling any more supported [than they were before]."

This administrator went on to specify that even new staff in new structures did not help people understand how to do their work differently.

Atlanta central office leaders described learning about the importance of re-training over time by trial and error. In one leader's words,

> My mistake [early on] was thinking that with that vague direction about "Go forth and … figure out the 'what is' and the 'to be' was going to get it … and to have them do it on their own—you know, identify a leader in the group and go forth. No. No. They started meeting. Now…to give the team credit … they jump into it … . Even when it's not crystal clear, you know because they know I'm saying, "You are very smart people or you wouldn't be on this team, so I don't expect you to come to me with just questions, questions, questions. I expect you to come to me with solutions." So that's the reason why they said "Okay, we can do this." But I didn't think anything about the human side of that—what I was really asking them to do. I didn't think about the skill set either for them to do it other than that they were smart and they knew something had to be done … . [I overestimated their] understanding of project management methodology, so you could do the 'what is' and the 'to be'—even a good understanding of the system as a whole.

Others attested to this description that engagement in such a project management approach took extensive hands-on job-embedded training , from consultants who

facilitated meetings and trained people in how to lead in a project-management model to central office leaders themselves. As one central office director reported,

> So what I learned is that when you have to rely on your team to get the work done, just like a principal in a school, you *must* make time for them. You *must* be very clear about the expectations. You *must* plan with them and make sure that everyone understands—and I mean planning down sometimes to the who, the what, the when, and the how. You cannot escape that. You cannot take it for granted that just because people are willing, they're smart, loyal to the district, and you know that they've been here—[just because of those reasons you can't assume] they *know* [what to do]. That you can leave that alone. They need feedback just like you're telling principals to do with teachers, okay? They need that sacred time with you beyond just the general meeting. They also need validation.

In all three districts, executive central office staff launched significant efforts to provide ongoing professional development for staff throughout the central office to help them adopt the new orientation to their work that central office transformation demanded. In so doing, these district leaders charted new territory. As many respondents reported, prior to the transformation effort, professional development opportunities for central office personnel were few and far between. Our scan of central office professional development opportunities at that period of time suggested that, at best, central office administrators might participate in doctoral programs at universities alongside other educators or attend annual conferences. By contrast, the central office professional development efforts in these systems aimed to provide each individual central office administrator with multiple, whole district, unit-specific, and individualized job embedded supports for improving their practice in the ways the central office transformation efforts demanded.

For example, in Oakland, executive central office staff organized a series of professional development retreats, mid-year workshops, and ongoing unit-specific conversations to help central office staff come to see their work as providing high-quality services to schools, specifically to strengthen schools' teaching and learning improvement efforts. As one executive-level staff person described the hands-on, ongoing involvement in central office professional development,

> … in the beginning, I created a … boot camp and I just got different resources from around the district to train people on different systems and procedures … . Since then … I spent time with each person on … some different systems stuff, and then what we've done is breakdown the various areas of things that people should

> know. So the new operations support coach spends time with each operations support coach learning those kind of skills, and also about being an operations support coach. So part of that person's training assignment is to teach them not only about those things but to take them on at least one school visit so you see … what does that actually mean to be at a school and how do you approach that relationship and all of that. And so then they get that perspective from a number of people.

Reports from participants indicate that these large-group meetings and job-embedded supports focused on basic central office procedures and how staff could come to know schools better to troubleshoot non-routine problems in ways that promised to be optimally responsive to schools. In addition, central office leaders created a new partnership with a local community college to increase some staff members' access to associate degrees and other educational opportunities to increase their readiness for jobs requiring more skills.

Within the New York City Empowerment Schools Organization, central office staff convened the network team members on a regular basis, much as they did the network leaders, for professional development on central office systems and how they might work with schools in ways that supported teaching and learning improvement. Beyond the ESO, system leaders relied, in part, on market mechanisms to drive improvement in the central office—in broad terms, the strategy of redirecting a significant amount of funds to the school level and "selling" central office services to them on an as-needed basis, and in competition with similar resources they could buy from other parts of the public system or outside the system. New York City leaders did not simply create a market. They also launched a professional development group called the Market Maker to help prepare staff to work effectively within a "market economy" and thereby increase the chances that central office administrators would actually provide services to schools that schools would want to purchase. As one central office administrator described,

> So, Market Maker was developed to sort of catalyze that market, meaning both build an infrastructure so that the sellers could actually package the services and market them and sell them … . You've got people [in the central office] who are sort of accustomed to providing [various services to schools with a] take-it-or-leave-it kind of mentality. [With the Market Maker we] … say to them … "Why does this service that you're wanting people to buy valuable? "Why would a school want that?"

Multiple respondents described the importance of these professional development opportunities to helping staff throughout the central office successfully participate in their work with a project-management, customer-service focus. For example, several New York City respondents commented that they believed the Market Maker and other professional development efforts were essential to realizing the goals of central office transformation, so that staff did not revert back to the old ways of doing business within the new structure of the school support organizations.

Holding Central Office Administrators Accountable for High-quality Performance

Central office administrators also fueled the reorganization and reculturing efforts when they developed and used new accountability mechanisms that held them accountable for improving the quality of support provided to school principals either directly or through their ILDs. As Atlanta Superintendent Beverly Hall reflected,

> … [W]e came up with a school reform team model, which was to decentralize the central office, place them in schools within their clusters, give them a lot of instructional support and whatever other support they need for central office. So the services would be closer. And there would be more accountability. I would know who was responsible for those schools. For everything from facilities to improving instruction, there was a person, an entity that was accountable. And that, perhaps has been, again, one of the most strategic things we could have done.

Each system had always had some mechanisms for holding central office staff accountable for their work. But under central office transformation, the new accountability tools called for holding central office staff accountable *for providing high-quality and relevant services to school principals*. Some central office leaders also reinforced accountability measures with sanctions and rewards for employees.

As part of these new accountability tools, central office administrators in all three districts created or were in the process of developing specific metrics for central office performance. In Atlanta, for example, staff responsible for facilities decided that a meaningful metric of their performance vis-à-vis support for teaching and learning would be whether or not work projects came in at or under budget and on time, thereby freeing up central office staff and central office funds for other

projects. Similarly, leaders in New York City described developing a clear set of measures for gauging individual central office administrators' performance. In the words of one, "We went into great detail about what exactly it is that we wanted them to do and how we define low performance, high performance, mediocre performance and those in between." Likewise, in Oakland, central office leaders launched a major effort to develop score cards for staff throughout the central office that defined high-quality work performance with specific measures and made those measures public throughout the system.

Importantly, central office administrators in these systems did not simply develop these accountability measures. They also used them to hold central office administrators accountable in ways that seemed at least to create the urgency for central office staff to improve their performance. In New York City, for example, central office executive staff often led other central office staff through processes of conducting self-assessments against the accountability system measures to help them focus attention on those measures and also develop personalized plans for building their competencies for meeting those standards. At the end of each year, executive staff evaluated those other central office personnel against the competencies and provided rewards and sanctions for different levels of performance. In perhaps the most extreme example of reliance on rewards and sanctions as an accountability lever, Atlanta Superintendent Hall tied her own compensation and that of her executive staff and other central office administrators to schools' performance on student achievement tests. As one executive staff person explained,

> Well, there are approximately five general areas where I'm rated or evaluated, plus a sixth is how do the students do in terms of student achievement. Dr. Hall is a firm believer in, even though I don't have direct student contact, my compensation is not going to improve if the students don't improve. So a big piece of my evaluation is tied to how the students do. So we might have some bricks-and-sticks-related objectives, but then we also have a big impact driven by the students.

Executive central office staff also gave legs to the accountability tools when they used them in public settings to ask central office staff challenging questions about their work and to publicly present evidence of their progress. One executive central office administrator in Atlanta described this public accountability as "a little bit scary for people" because "then they're exposed." In one example, an executive central office staff person described how such public accountability provided a significant impetus for some staff to change their practice,

> So [we] had this meeting [with one unit] and … say "Well, why can't this get done?" [Staff responded] "Well, so-and-so's … [a staff person in purchasing is not doing a good job with their part.] So at that next meeting, I had the purchasing guy there at the table. [I asked] "Well, why can't this be done?" [They said] "It's technology." So the next meeting we brought technology in. "It's HR" [they said]. So we brought HR. Then it's other people in finance. So eventually we had everybody at the table—everybody. Because I said "Whoever you point the finger to, you will have to point it to their face."

This person went on to say that *as a result of such accountability efforts, central office administrators started to understand that they could no longer put responsibility for poor central office performance on someone else but they had to take responsibility to improve their own work*. And, as the administrator continued, for some central office staff those meetings are …

> very, very uncomfortable … . [One central office staff person] told me literally … "No one has ever said that to me" [i.e. that I need to do a better job]. I said, "You're living down here in a fog, buddy. Everybody thinks that you guys suck! I'm here to tell you! ... So let's go about doing some of the things that we can do to help change that perception because that perception really is everyone else's reality except yours … . What planet are you living on that you think everything's going well?

Oakland stood out in our study for its efforts at least to plan to engage family members in helping to hold central office administrators accountable for their performance. For example, an initiative called ComPAS or Community Plan for Accountability in Schools focused on creating what one central office administrator called "two-way accountability" between families and the district that spelled out what central office administrators were "expecting from families and from community members in terms of their role in supporting children in achieving in school and becoming successful adults. And then on the other side of that is helping work with them so they know what to hold us accountable for." Central office administrators described that by creating opportunities for public participation in accountability, including the public presentation of results, central office leaders aimed to increase the pressure on central office staff to provide higher quality supports to schools.

Summary

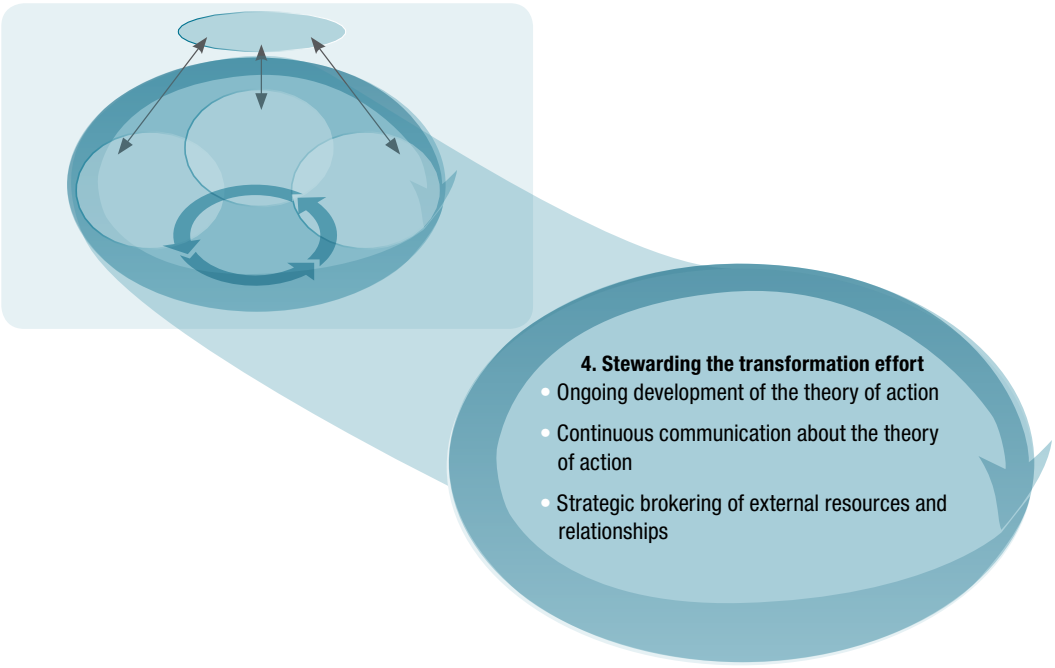
In this chapter we have argued that efforts to reorganize and reculture units throughout central offices are fundamental to realizing the goals of central office transformation. Such efforts seemed particularly promising in this regard when they moved beyond simply restructuring central office units but reinforcing substantially new ways of working with schools. This meant a number of things: *shifting to "case management" and "project management" approaches* to central office work; *restaffing and retraining*, so that central office units, old and new, were filled with people how knew how to tackle the new work of the central office; and *establishing accountability systems* that made the work of all central office units visible and connected them to the improvement of teaching and learning in schools. When these different practices worked in concert, the central office showed clear signs of becoming a far more supportive and responsive force in the overall equation of educational reform.

CHAPTER 5

Dimension 4: Stewardship of the Overall Central Office Transformation Process

The preceding three dimensions of central office transformation have concentrated on the work practices of three sets of staff in the central office—the ILDs, in their ongoing engagement with school principals; other central office staff who provide direct support to the ILDs; and staff in the full range of central office units, who are attempting to reorient their work so that it complements and supports the focus on helping schools improve. But the efforts of all these staff to reinvent their practice reflects a larger sense of purpose and direction, communicated by certain central office leaders who *stewarded* the development of the overall effort as it unfolded. As signaled schematically by Figure 5 below, they did so by shaping and communicating theories of action about how to create a central office that substantially contributed to the improvement of teaching and learning systemwide. In so doing, they offered system participants a "big picture" of, and rationale for, tackling and persisting in the difficult work of transformation.

Figure 5. Dimension 4: Stewardship of the Overall Central Office Transformation Process



A coherent, well articulated, and well understood theory of action acted as an anchor for central office transformation. The idea of a *theory of action*, derived from studies of individual and organizational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1974, 1996), articulates the underlying logic of work or leaders' starting assumptions about how and why an action, or set of actions, such as central office transformation, will lead to some desired outcome(s). Theories of action for transforming the central office in each district were different than, for example, strategic plans, which are more formal policy documents that might be revisited, vetted, and decided upon once every five or ten years in an organization. The districts' theories of action were more akin to a set of "best guesses" or hypotheses about what transformation strategies to use, and why those were likely to work with respect to supporting improvements in teaching and learning systemwide. As such, most of our evidence about the care and tending to theories of action came from what we observed in the way the work was planned, delivered, and discussed by central office leaders over time (what researchers would call the "theory-in-use"), or what leaders told us about why they were taking the steps that we observed.

This ongoing attention to steering the evolution of the overall reform can be understood as a form of *stewardship*—that is, "the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care."[18] District leaders exercised this stewardship through leadership actions that shaped the ongoing theories of action for the work, communicating and engaging others in understanding the work, and brokering support for the work from outside the system. In distinguishing what specific stewardship activities fostered the overall central office transformation effort, we again triangulated observations and self-reports and inductively narrowed down a set of activities that we and our respondents consistently identified as supportive of the development and implementation of the overall transformation process. We were interested in how leaders shaped the overall strategies for central office transformation through decisions based on the evidence of results their theories of action led them to expect would occur. Specifically, in exercising stewardship, central office administrators:

- *Continuously developed the theory of action for central office transformation.* As we indicated at the outset of this report, the design of the central office transformation effort was being developed in each context over time, based on initial theories of action about what a central office should and could do to sys-

[18] Merriam-Webster Online, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stewardship, downloaded 3.2.10.

temically support improvements in teaching and learning. As such, the direction and substance of these theories of action was inherently fluid, not fixed, requiring ongoing tending from central office leaders, who took steps to continuously shape the work to produce better results.

- *Continuously communicated and engaged others in understanding the theory of action underlying the central office transformation effort.* Along with developing the theory of action in each district, leaders also communicated about the strategies in use, and the underlying rationale for these strategies. Continuously engaging district participants and constituents in understanding the work of transformation proved crucial to continuing the work, and where this was lacking or missing, there was confusion or ambivalence about the effort on the part of some district participants.

- *Strategically brokered external resources and relationships to support the overall central office transformation process.* In addition to ongoing development and communication of the theory of action, stewardship involved leaders in brokering support for transformation. Leaders brokered various kinds of support including the development of new sources of grant funding or in the engagement of external partners hired for their expertise.

Chief executives—superintendents or other highly placed administrators who had or shared in overall responsibility for the district's performance and improvement—carried out many of these activities but not exclusively. Due to the special public accountability and attention their positions demanded, these executive leaders were often leading decision making processes that shaped the work of central office transformation, communicating what the work involved, or the rationale for that work, to various audiences as it unfolded. Other central office administrators, including deputy superintendents, chief academic and operational officers, and chiefs of staff, also participated in stewardship activities.

Continuously Developing the Theory of Action for Central Office Transformation

Leaders took action to establish theories of action in each district rooted in the fundamental assumption that the central office ought to exist primarily to support teaching and learning improvement in partnership with the schools. New York City/Empowerment Schools Organization (ESO) CEO Nadelstern put it plainly in a national publication,

> School districts have exactly the kinds of schools they're designed to have. If you want something different to take place at the school level, then something different has to take place at the district. [19]

Doing "something different" involved central office leaders making choices about what strategies to employ to make the central office more effective in supporting teaching and learning improvements.

In Atlanta, the theory of action for central office transformation began with the simple notion that central office leaders needed to closely examine what teachers and principals in schools needed from the central office, as the deputy superintendent noted:

> When you think 'schools first' and plan back up to the central office, the question is "What do schools need [from the central office] in order to stay focused on teaching and learning so that children learn at higher levels? What do teachers say they need all the time? What do principals say they need all the time so they can stay focused on their work?" Teachers say 'I need somebody in my classroom to help me. I need them to tell me what I'm doing, help me do it better without it being evaluative.' Right? ... Principals say 'I spend most of my day navigating a system, trying to get my needs met—I can't get HR [support] … . Alright? So you need to set up a one-stop [central office] shop that gives people that kind of support.

These comments from leaders in New York and Atlanta establish the basic tenet that leaders across all three sites took seriously—***figuring out the "right" approach to transformation of the central office in service of improving teaching and learning system-wide required central office leaders to take their cues from schools about what was needed, and respond accordingly.***

As the work of central office transformation unfolded, leaders stewarding the reform in each system kept the broader focus on whether the theory of action and accompanying strategies were the "right" ones, or whether they needed to be altered based on evidence as the work unfolded. For example, the creation of network leaders and network teams in the New York City/ESO, by initial design, was an effort to fully satisfy the support needs of the school principal to lead instructional improvement—working to broker between schools and the broader district and external environment to help bring various resources to bear on schools'

[19] *Horace*, Summer 2005, Vol. 21 No. 3.

efforts to chart their own path for school improvement. A key steward of the ESO reflected on this aspect of the design,

> [We] have this thing around satisfaction, [where our] relationship building [has occurred] around advocacy. [Our] entrée with principals [has been:] "I can help you to get stuff done," [and] that's what they get to rely on us for.

As their central office work developed, leaders in the ESO, paying attention to this big picture issue that underlay the reform, gleaned new insights from evidence they gathered about what it actually took for a central office to support principals well in "getting stuff done." For example, ESO leaders noticed over time that, while principals mostly reported feeling well-supported by network teams on the instructional leadership dimensions of their work, there were nagging problems with the nature of operations support provided from five New York City borough-based offices, called Integrated Service Centers (ISCs), that were often far removed from schools and not well-coordinated with what was happening in networks. Principals complained, for example, of time delays in getting basic work orders filled, special education cases for which decisions were seemingly never made, and the need to pierce a multi-layered regional bureaucracy in order to get to the person in the ISC who could finally address whatever the support need happened to be.

These insights from principals about the problems with operational support in the ESO resulted in a significant shift in the theory of action for network teams. ESO leaders moved from a conception of these teams as mainly providing instructional support, to a new conception that the teams would become "full-service" organizations which also supported business and operations functions, because integrating those functions would better support what principals said they needed. This change in the theory of action led ESO administrators to design and pilot the initial Children's First Network [CFN], that featured support based on this conception of combining the instructional and operational sides of the work in one network team. The results from this pilot were positive and instructive, and in the year following the pilot several additional networks based on this model were created.

The ESO example above shows clearly how central office transformation was not an "off-the-shelf" policy or program; leaders in each district were inventing and reinventing their theories of action over time. In Atlanta we observed a series of shifts in practice that reflected underlying changes in the theory of action for how to best support high school change. Atlanta's initial structure featured five school

reform teams (SRTs), including four that worked with K–8 schools in regions of the district, and one assigned to provide assistance to all of the district's high schools. What Atlanta's leaders learned through examining practice was that efforts to support change in high schools lagged behind the work in the K–8 schools; elementary schools were smaller, and the SRT staff could focus their energies on particular content areas in very targeted ways. While not as immediately successful, strategies similar to those used in elementary schools seemed to take hold in most Atlanta middle schools as well. High schools, however, proved more complicated and more difficult to permeate in terms of providing the kind of assistance that would lead to improvements in teaching and learning.

This realization challenged the initial theory of action for how best to support improvements in teaching and learning in district's high schools, which were continually failing to meet targets, and prompted district leaders to create revisions in the central office structure of administrative support. The newly created Office of High Schools included additional personnel who were hired because of their expertise in creating or turning around high schools. These staff initially worked alongside the existing SRT structure, and eventually took over the entire support function for high schools.

Atlanta district leaders shifted their underlying assumptions in other aspects of central office work, as it played out. Additional changes we observed in the theory of action included:

- The streamlining and repurposing of central office–provided professional development support for schools, based on feedback from schools that these efforts appeared at times incoherent, and not well aligned with the actual work schools were trying to accomplish.
- The development of an Office of Strategy and Development designed to bring a "project" orientation to the work of central office departments, pulling participants together in cross-functional teams to focus on nagging problems with the system's performance (as described in Chapter 4). The work done by this office resulted in a number of systemic changes to central office practice, including the adoption of a balanced scorecard to track the work of improvement system-wide and to support deeper, more timely assessments of system progress.

Top leaders in Atlanta acting to steward the overall effort in each district thus appeared to take seriously the idea that central office practice was a "work in

progress" and paid attention to where and how the transformation could continue to provide better, deeper, more responsive support for schools.

We saw evidence in Oakland, as well, of how executive leaders continued to grapple with their initial theory of action behind the creation of the 'Service Economy,' one substantial part of the overall central office transformation that was designed as a "strategic investment approach that place[d] schools at the center of all financial decisions, provide[d] all stakeholders with accurate and timely data about spending priorities and effectiveness, and ensure[d] that schools have the ability to choose the services that best meet the needs of their students."[20] As the work unfolded, leaders were faced with revising the theory of action based on the difficulty with realizing the original intent, as one senior central office administrator reported:

> We had a pretty interesting meeting this Monday in the afternoon session where it posed some real, I think, complications for our theory of action and in particular around the service economy and to what extent, you know the differences between espoused theory and theory in use … We are, I think running up against some real limitations in how we can actually operationalize the service economy and need to come to grips with … where does it sit in the hierarchy of design principles and reform strategies in the district anymore.

Continuously Communicating and Engaging Others in Understanding the Theory of Action Underlying Central Office Transformation

Along with ongoing efforts to develop and refine their approach to central office transformation, district leaders worked to continuously communicate their theories of action, including the rationale for why they were doing what they were doing, in ways that would help all constituents understand both what the work was, and why the work mattered. The ongoing attention to developing a theory of action for central office transformation established the basis for leaders to be able to tell a causal story about central office leadership practice—how what people in the central office were doing mattered for improving teaching and learning.

[20] From Oakland "Expect Success" Annual Report 2006-07, retrieved on March 25, 2010 from http://www.urbanstrategies.org/programs/schools/documents/20062007Annualreport.pdf

Communication about, and engagement in, aspects of districts' theories of action for central office transformation emphasized several ideas. At the heart of this communication was the message that the work of central office transformation was serving students' learning. Leaders acting to steward the work of central office transformation consistently conveyed that the work was successful only to the extent that it mattered for improving learning for children and young people. We frequently heard central office leaders communicate this emphasis on the collective nature of the effort, and the focus on serving children well. For example, in the New York City/ESO, the CEO's communication with network leaders noted:

> If the work we've done doesn't result in changing the behavior of teachers so more kids are more successful, it will not be worth the effort. The second issue is the profound impact we've had on how principals think about us. A 95% approval rate is unheard of for any service organization, and in public education, it is inconceivable. Understanding that the important work is what teachers do with kids. and our work is [to support] them.

Similarly, in Atlanta, Superintendent Hall often conveyed how central office transformation efforts were focused on improving results for students over time. A remark from a 2006 'state of the schools' speech, for example, showed how the work was shifting focus, based on the significant improvements—a focus that resulted in a change in leadership for a new Office of High Schools and reorganized subject matter support for the middle grade schools from the central office:

> Our work has been systemic and targeted to ensure incremental system-wide student success over time. As I brought to your attention over a year ago, the majority of our elementary schools are making adequate progress, have reached their rigorous Atlanta targets at least once, and are into the details of fine-tuning their instructional improvements. We are now focusing more attention on improving student achievement at the middle and high school levels, while continuing our focus at the elementary grades.

The communication and engagement of others in understanding the work, where it was heading, and on what rationale it rested was important to the sustainability of central office transformation. For instance, in Atlanta, various executive central office staff made formal and informal presentations on the central office transformation effort at various stages of its development. Superintendent Hall was the most frequent, and most public, presenter, taking advantage of opportunities in various forums to discuss how the work was evolving and lessons that she and

others had learned about how to help schools improve their performance. Such forums included meetings of all Atlanta administrators as well as community recognition ceremonies and speeches to other groups in the community. For example, in one such talk, Hall relied on metaphor to highlight how the theory of action for improving schools would necessarily change based on evidence from progress. Building on organizational change concepts from researcher Ronald Heifetz, Hall described the first part of the "climb" to improve the district as primarily "technical" change, and that on the final part of the climb in Atlanta, the deeper work of "adaptive change" was yet to come and would pose particular challenges for her staff:

> So what does this mean [that the work is now about adaptive change]? Let's look in the classroom, for an example. [In the first years of the reform effort] [w]e took teachers' current know-how and added prescriptive approaches, monitored by experts, to realize results. At the central office level, we hired a senior management team who were technically competent in each of their areas of responsibility. The same is true with operations. We redesigned our central support to be more decentralized with the school reform team structure and began working cross-functionally as an organization. Now as we embark on what I consider to be the most dangerous and difficult climb up the mountain, we must be prepared to do adaptive work. And again, Heifetz defines adaptive challenges as "Those that require us to learn new ways." And who does that work? It's the people with the problem. In other words, everyone must now own the work, not just at the leadership level, not just at the principal's level, but at every level of the organization. We must all now learn new ways, and work differently, to get us to the top of the mountain and to sustain the reforms over time. And, we must still keep our eye on the technical work.

Hall explained that her role in the central office transformation effort meant not only developing the theory of action for change over time, but continually engaging her staff in understanding the history and evolution of the effort and the underlying rationale for changes related to her understanding of how central offices could support teaching and learning improvement. In her words,

> I must be able to articulate [what we're doing and why] to every group of stakeholders. So I'm giving speech after speech, meeting after meeting, I go to everything from Rotary, Kiwanis, coalition of big business, to living room chats, to SRT cluster meetings of PTA—and I think people like for me to do that. They come out, they want to hear it.

Confirming the value of such communications, we found remarkable consistency between how Hall framed the importance of transformation in central office practice for supporting teaching and learning improvement, and the learning improvement that actually occurred in schools. This foundational rationale—that improvement in teaching and learning across the entire system was incumbent on the central office playing a critical support role—ran counter to the way business had been done in Atlanta, and required major changes in how people in the central office thought about their work, detailed in the preceding three chapters. The essential message that supporting schools was the paramount duty of the central office was captured in a refrain we heard consistently from multiple central office leaders that their work involved "flipping the script." Consistent with the theory of action that redefined the central office as a service organization that existed to support the work in schools, "flipping the script" was Atlanta's code phrase for a sea change in how the central office-school relationship was understood, and why the central office existed.

Similarly, in New York City, executive staff of the ESO frequently communicated internally and externally about shifts in how their central office transformation effort was evolving to reflect new learning, as the ESO worked to scale up their initial efforts to dozens, then hundreds, of schools. In one instance, an executive staff person explained the decision to expand network teams to include four to six additional staff people to help handle operational issues for school principals,

> We believe services are best performed by an integrated service team than a large geographically-based service center, who at a different time and [under different] leadership could revert back to [the previous] political system, since all politics are geographic. Going into this year, we're not only quadrupling … [the number of networks with additional operational staff] but taking this opportunity to engage the [NYC] Department [of Education] in a conversation about whether this might be a better strategy for everyone. We have one network now. We'll be at four next year. If the four work, there is no reason not to believe it can't work for the entire organization.

In support of the value of such communications, network leaders offered remarkably consistent accounts of the history of the central office transformation effort and reasons for its growth in particular directions. Some pointed out that while they did not necessarily agree with some developments, particularly in the area of accountability, they were well aware of what those developments were and how

the various leaders of the system expected them to participate in implementation. Where such communication regularly occurred, it helped to reinforce the importance of everyone tying what they were doing to the overarching efforts to improve teaching and learning; it seemed to help various internal and external participants in implementation engage more fully in understanding the work and how they contributed to the work.

Evidence from Oakland, too, confirmed the importance of such ongoing communication, particularly with regard to how the transformation effort addressed teaching and learning improvement goals, by both positive and negative example. We found one central office administrator particularly attuned to the importance of this form of stewardship. As this person described,

> I spend a lot of time with principals talking to them… about their budgets, their concerns, the services … . I've been going out to these staff meetings where we go as strategy team to talk to principals and staff. And I've been on purpose talking about [the budgeting system] more because I want to hear what people are saying. And what I've realized is most people, including principals, like when I really explain what was the theory of action behind … [the budget system] and how it was an equity strategy because it redistributed the wealth from the highland to the lowland schools … . And [if] you're a flatland school you'd get more money, but you were supposed to use that money to hire more coaches and things to support your new teachers so that eventually … you would get a more and more seasoned staff. That was the way it was supposed to work. And the reality is … a lot of people didn't do that. Instead of hiring a coach they said, 'Well, let's do reduced class size.' Well sure, reduced class size is good, but if you're all new teachers and you have reduced class size and there's no one to coach you, guess what, those teachers are going to leave. You're going to have a higher attrition rate because people are going to be frustrated.

Despite the efforts of this one speaker to communicate the theory of action of the central office transformation efforts, some central office administrators struggled to understand aspects of the central office transformation process and their underlying rationale: their lack of clarity or understanding had potentially negative consequences for implementation.

The challenge of changes in top district personnel was one reason Oakland personnel struggled with clarity about the specifics of transformation. NExOs, for example, reported that they were unclear why [their] position[s] had changed or

how they were supposed to realize the outcomes for which they were being held accountable without the authority and resources they had originally been promised. This mismatch in expectations coupled with limited communication about the rationale for such shifts and other factors fueled sharp conflict between some NExOs and senior central office staff, ultimately resulting in significant turnover of these ILDs. Such results are not surprising. As one respondent put it, "I think it's just like with any… change. Trying to get everybody on the same page about what the theory of action is, especially if the theory of action is complex, which ours is [is challenging]."

Oakland also faced the added challenge of launching their central office transformation effort while under state receivership, which included the removal of the superintendent, and the requirement to report to an on-site state administrator. The on-site administrator changed three times between the start of the central office transformation effort and the conclusion of our study period, six years later.

Communication of the underlying theory of action, as the evidence above suggests, forms a second crucial aspect of stewardship of the work of central office transformation. Data suggest this is a particularly important aspect of the work of executive leaders, who are often in the public eye, and have the ability to shape understanding of the work with multiple audiences.

Strategically Brokering External Resources and Relationships to Support the Overall Central Office Transformation Process

Stewardship also meant that central office leaders brokered resources and relationships with organizations outside the central office to support the transformation process. The benefits of such work seemed obvious: ambitious change efforts such as central office transformation require substantial investments of various resources and often new resources to grow and thrive. Such brokering activities also helped implementation when central office leaders were strategically selective about which resources they brought into the system, focusing on those resources that promised to fuel the implementation of their vision for central office transformation. Atlanta Superintendent Hall noted, "The other piece I spend a lot of time on is getting resources." She went on to elaborate how an intensive amount of her time was required to elicit financial support from external partners to support the work. Hall's efforts to find resources to support change began early,

perhaps most prominently with ten schools supported through the Project Grad effort,[21] and continued throughout our time in the district.

Superintendent Hall convened members of the corporate community in Atlanta as fiscal and knowledge resources. As one participant in those convenings described,

> When Dr. Hall first came, the business community … really wanted a change and were really willing to support her in doing that in any way possible, and she even had like a[n] [informal CEO advisory team] of the top CEO's in the city—Coke, GE, Georgia Pacific—come together—Atlanta Gaslight, Bell South. And … she would meet with them once a quarter. And they would *really* talk about things … .They would give her that kind of wisdom that they'd get from those places.

Importantly, Hall and other central office administrators did not accept all resources that became available to them but rather scrutinized resources for the fit with the central office transformation effort. As one described,

> My role quite often is looking at various types of programs. People contact Dr. Hall [saying], "We have this fabulous program. We wanted you to do it." So nine times out of ten, she sends it down to me for me to investigate it. I'll investigate it. Meet with the individual if it makes sense and it can support what we want to do. Then I'll move it on to my boss or go back to Dr. Hall [and say], "This sounds good, you might want to [consider engaging this work]." If it doesn't, I [choose not to engage this work]. … [A]ll too often a lot of the vendors just see us as a cash cow and they try to bring in anything and we're supposed to … take it. [Here] it doesn't work like that … .

Similarly, senior central office administrators in New York City routinely engaged in the strategic brokering of resources for the central office transformation effort—both fiscal as well as knowledge resources. For example, ESO leaders sought out experts from the United Kingdom to help inform how they structured and provided resources for their Network Leaders and teams. As noted by one central office administrator, this brokering effort focused on:

[21] Project Grad is a comprehensive school reform organization that uses a combination of several other comprehensive school reform programs in concert to support increases in student achievement. See the website for more information http://www.projectgradatlanta.org/site/pp.asp?c=kkIXLcMTJrE&b=782817 (downloaded 3.22.10). Superintendent Hall had previously worked with Project Grad during her tenure as Newark, NJ superintendent.

> … understanding the policies and the support pieces that would have to happen to assure that people in leadership positions in the network get resources driven in the right direction, and some … guidance in choosing those resources … . We had a visit from … . the guy who was in charge of instruction and all the reform in England under Tony Blair … . I spoke to him about how did he think was the best way to work with principals around some of the instructional issues when you've given them so much autonomy and you've removed curriculum mandates. How do you still get them to understand what's at stake, and how do we avoid being like [three other urban districts] … who tried all of those things—tried autonomy, tried accountability, and didn't have instructional gains at the end—how do we avoid that.

Oakland stood out in our data for its efforts to work strategically with members of the private philanthropic community, to tap them both as knowledge resources as well as funders of their efforts to transform central office practice. In this district, central office administrators staffed and otherwise participated in quarterly meetings of representatives from various foundations that contributed to their central office transformation effort. At those meetings, we observed how central office staff provided updates on their progress, engaged funders in discussions about next steps, and challenged funders to consider how they might work together to fund their ongoing efforts, especially in light of persistently large budget shortfalls in California districts.

In addition to brokering fiscal and knowledge resources, central office administrators also fueled the central office transformation effort by brokering relationships with school board members, union representatives, and philanthropic and corporate funders. These relationship-building efforts focused on building political support for central office transformation. For example, leaders in Oakland described and demonstrated that the custodians' union had become an ardent supporter of the central office transformation effort, thanks to central office leaders' efforts to engage union leadership as partners. Through the partnership, custodians agreed to higher standards for their performance while the central office created professional opportunities to support them in meeting those challenges, including the creation of a partnership with a local community college to help district office staff complete their associate degrees.

Summary

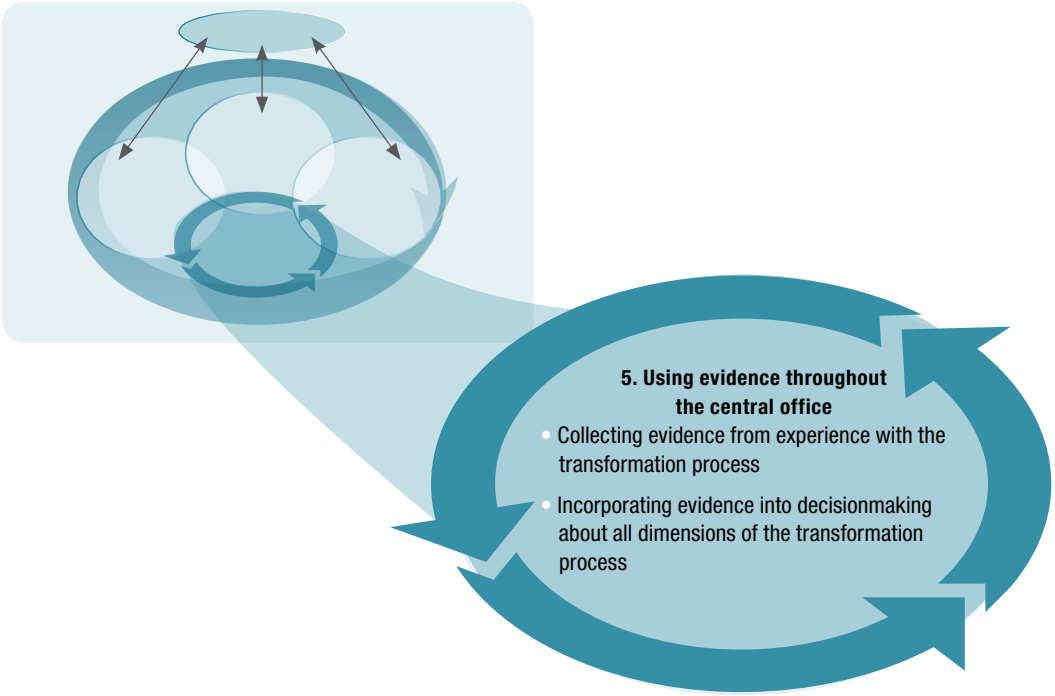
Stewardship of the central office transformation effort was crucial to the development of the work in each district context. Stewardship involved the ongoing development of a theory of action that necessarily changed over time as the central office work unfolded. Changing central office practice to more centrally support improvement in teaching and learning system-wide proved to be a work in progress for each site, requiring ongoing attention, in particular from executive leaders who focused on the bigger picture of where the reform was heading and why, not just on the details. Parallel to their work with attending to and steering the ongoing development of the theory of action, stewards also played an important communication function, engaging others in understanding the work and the strategies and the underlying rationale for central office transformation. Finally, stewardship involved leaders brokering external resources to support the work of central office transformation over time.

CHAPTER 6

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

Central office administrators across the three districts used evidence to varying degrees to inform how they participated in central office transformation, as suggested schematically by Figure 6 below.

Figure 6. Dimension 5: Use of Evidence Throughout Central Office to Support Improvement of Practice and School Relationships



As part of their use of evidence, central office administrators routinely examined schools' standardized test results, but even more commonly, they collected evidence from principals' and other central office administrators' *experience* with the central office transformation process and incorporated that evidence into their decision-making. Research on educational and other organizations highlights the importance of this form of evidence use, what researchers have called "learning from experience," or "working knowledge" to helping organizations realize their goals (Honig, 2003; Kennedy, 1982; Levitt & March, 1988). As that research

would suggest, and as indicated by our observations and interviews, such evidence-use activities were an important dimension of central office transformation.

Both the collection and incorporation of evidence from experience into ongoing decisions about the central office transformation process proved challenging for most central office administrators. As one central office administrator described, the "frenetic" pace of the central office transformation effort left hardly any time to document and examine their work. Another wanted to be spending time with staff discussing "how it's going, and I don't feel like we … have time to talk about that." Likewise, a third reflected, "There's so much information … and a real … data collection opportunity … . And I just haven't had the capacity" to be able to incorporate those data into decisions. However, these and some other central office administrators generally reported that they were, in the words of one, "always working" to make such evidence use a routine part of their practice, including hiring additional staff to help with that aspect of the work.

In this chapter we summarize our findings about how central office administrators in the three districts collected evidence from experience and worked to incorporate that evidence into the ongoing development of each of the previous four dimensions of central office transformation: assistance to principals, support to those who were assisting principals, the reorganization and reculturing of the rest of the central office, and stewardship of the transformation effort.

Use of Evidence to Support Direct Partnership Relationships with Principals (Dimension 1)

The individual ILDs, whose work offered support for principals' instructional leadership, routinely collected and used evidence about the effectiveness of that work to inform their continued work with principals. Just as excellent classroom teachers routinely assess their students' learning and use that information to differentiate and improve instruction, many of the ILDs in our sample approached their work with principals in a similar way. For example, as described, several Oakland NExOs and virtually all executive directors in Atlanta regularly gathered and used evidence about their principals' development as instructional leaders. This evidence included school performance on standardized state-mandated tests but also their own observations, for example, of how principals prioritized their work on teaching and learning, and principals' ability to observe and analyze teachers during classroom observations. These ILDs used that evidence to ground decisions about

prioritizing visits to particular schools and how to group expert and more novice principals during network meetings.

In some districts, ILDs also routinely discussed with each other what they were learning about how to support principals and how they might use those lessons to inform their practice. For instance, the twice-monthly network leader meetings in New York City featured frequent examples of Empowerment Schools Organization (ESO) central staff facilitating conversations about how the network leaders typically handled certain situations with principals and the pros and cons of various approaches. As one ESO staff member reflected on those meetings, "It's been a long time since I've been in a place where people invite that kind of criticism and see it as an avenue for your own growth." Also in this district, we observed how senior central office staff used meeting time to share results from regular principal satisfaction surveys with network leaders and to facilitate small and whole group discussions about lessons they might take from the survey findings. Executive staff also followed up on these discussions by meeting with individual network leaders to discuss results and the implications for their own practice.

Use of Evidence to Inform and Strengthen Professional Support for Instructional Leadership Directors (Dimension 2)

In New York and Atlanta, senior central office staff intentionally used evidence to inform and continuously improve how they worked to support ILDs' practice. That is, rather than using this evidence mainly to evaluate ILD effectiveness, these central office administrators used various data *to inform their own practice* in supporting the ILDs. To illustrate, a central office staff person in New York reflected publicly that, in examining feedback from network leaders about their experience working with him/her,

> I often found myself stretched too thin. I know I was giving short shrift to things that must be done more thoroughly, from certain people who could benefit from more support. I didn't make the time to work closely with them. As I learned and got deep into operations issues I wasn't being as focused on instructional issues for a period this year. In general my weakness in terms of supporting folks is I'm not that good … at positive feedback. I display my sense of respect usually by critique [rather] than by applause. That usually doesn't work for everyone.

This comment, to which network leaders responded with applause and praise, captures how those assisting the central office–principal partnerships were using evidence from experience, including feedback, to improve their own practice in providing such assistance.

Those providing professional support to ILDs routinely solicited and used evidence from various sources to inform their assistance for ILDs. Particularly in New York, where professional development for ILDs was also the best developed of all three districts, feedback from ILDs significantly shaped how other central office administrators designed and implemented opportunities for network leaders to improve their practice. For instance, executive central office staff in New York routinely facilitated extended discussions during their twice-monthly network leader meetings about how well the meetings and central office staff were working for participants and how both might be improved. At several of these meetings, central office staff used data from written end-of-meeting reflections and evaluations to kick off and otherwise ground those discussions. As one central office staff member framed one of those discussions,

> Most of what came back [in the recent written meeting evaluations] wasn't new information, but [it is] useful to have [it] in this way. I want to throw open the floor for people to talk about what their thoughts are. [We] asked three questions at the end, including, "What's working for you?" [That's] important, but not the main reason [we are] having the conversation. [We're] more interested in what's not working, since we are interested in making adjustments. So that's the second question, "What's not working?" … That's the point of this—to solicit that information. So the floor's open.

Multiple staff people within the ESO described and demonstrated that their professional responsibilities specifically included capturing input from network leaders and translating it into terms that others throughout the ESO and central office system might use to inform and improve their supports for network leaders. For example, one of these staff people jumped into a conversation and reminded the group,

> I'm working hard to capture a lot of rich and useful conversation, and trying to distill it into three large strands. The broad stroke is we talked about how we need to differentiate our work, and do that in [a] way that builds capacity at the network level, school leadership, and classroom level. How do we find ways to identify strengths … within networks … and between schools? Second, how do

> we provide collegial resources, in that, making sure network teams recognize the needs they have, and have the time to go deeper to come up with multiple grouping strategies to figure out areas of needs and strengths. Collect tools so schools don't have to replicate. This could be housed electronically and include inside tools, best practices in teaching and learning and operations … . Others talk about the importance of [having the time for] sharing best practices … Anything else?

The attempt by central office administrators to ground support for network leaders in feedback marked a distinct shift and improvement in the functioning of the central office between 2006–07 and 2007–08. In the spring of 2007, network leaders generally indicated that ESO central staff talked at them and did not provide opportunities for them to participate in the development of the ESO. However, starting in the fall of 2007, their comments more typically included remarks such as the following, "I think [ESO central office staff are] listening to us a lot more now than they did say last year, and so that's helped." Another confirmed, "I've worked with [ESO central office administrator] in [other capacities] and I know he does listen, and he does take feedback, and he listens to and wants input from everybody."

These central office staff not only collected feedback but they also actually used it in the design and implementation of supports for ILDs. For example, New York network leaders had conveyed that as the ESO had grown—from around 15 network leaders in 2006-2007 to 22 by the end of 2008 (and closer to 100 network team staff attending some ESO meetings)—network leaders were losing a sense of collegial professional support within the ESO. In response, senior ESO staff developed a new model for organizing network leaders into smaller clusters of three to five network teams, providing a format for doing work within and across clusters while streamlining network leaders' points of contact for issues such as business services, rather than have different people serve different clusters. One ESO central office staff member responsible for the professional learning of network leaders described that her position came about when she was a network leader because she had been "nagging" the head of the ESO for such a position. That leader responded by creating such a position and hiring the network leader and others.

In another example, one ESO central office administrator described,

> A lot of network leaders didn't know how to enter into conversations with schools around instructional support … . I have been thinking about how to address that need, so that schools begin to see instructional support as something they would

> want to go to their network team for. The thing that tipped me off to this was when we did the network leader survey [a survey of principals about their network leaders] two and a half months ago. The lowest rating in terms of network leader satisfaction [i.e., principals' satisfaction with their network leaders] was around instructional PD [professional development] we had been doing.

This person went on to describe how they then used such evidence to inform not only the conversations they prompted in network leader meetings but also in their development of tools for network leaders, including a common instructional framework much like the *26 Best Practices* tool in Atlanta.

In fact, one reason the *26 Best Practices* tool came about in Atlanta was that senior central office administrators reviewed various sources of evidence about principal performance and how the executive directors worked with their principals. Senior central office administrators subsequently used that evidence to inform the development of the tool and support for executive directors in using it to ground their work with principals. As one central office administrator recounted,

> So I just kept asking principals when I'd visit their schools and they kept saying – well first they didn't know how to articulate it [high-quality teaching]. They were saying, "Well … everybody's focused on data … All the SRT's help us understand that. But they do it differently. They look at things differently." So I'm hearing that. ... So I'm listening and I'm visiting classrooms and I'm saying, you know what, the things I'm talking with the principals about, [executive directors] didn't pick up [in observing classrooms]. So [the executive directors] don't know what to look for [to gauge the extent to which principals are responding aggressively to low test scores]. So I had the executive directors bring in examples of principal feedback to teachers. They didn't know what they were seeing—they couldn't give feedback to it, right? So I said to [two consultants] who have been my partners in crime through this, we have to do something. I need some APS teaching expectations that go further than just the performance evaluation instrument that really details what teachers do, alright? What do teachers do at high levels? So we worked on it … . For three years we figured this out. ...

Use of Evidence in the Reorganization and Reculturing of the Rest of the Central Office (Dimension 3)

As discussed above, the reorganization and reculturing of the rest of the central office fundamentally involved the use of evidence. For instance, project management by design demanded that central office administrators use evidence from their own experience, internal assessments and audits, and other sources to help them address specific problems with their support for teaching and learning improvement. For example, as one central office administrator described the centrality of evidence use to the ongoing project management focus of the Oakland Operations Support unit,

> I think one of the things that's successful [about what we do] is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. That we really capitalize on [our] … shared learning [so the work can] … evolve and be what it needs to be at the time.

We found that across all three systems, central office administrators also routinely collected and tried to use evidence, mainly from principals and, occasionally, from ILDs to inform their understanding of their progress with reorganizing and reculturing other central office units and adjustments to their change strategies.

One key strategy for collecting feedback from principals related to changes in central office work was to convene principals for discussions of their interactions with the central office. For instance, in Atlanta, the superintendent met regularly with small groups of principals to discuss their experience with various aspects of the central office, including those aspects that reflected the district's reorganization and reculturing efforts. These conversations provided either the feedback or direct recommendations back to central office units to inform their change efforts. Sometimes, the superintendent asked staff from other central office units to sit in on her principal meetings to hear the feedback directly. As one central office administrator described these meetings,

> When Dr. Hall meets with those principals and they bring it to her attention that maybe [one department] is creating a barrier for them … . And the [department] person was able to hear that and she went back and really worked with her department, reorganized the entire department so that they could be closer to the school when they assigned the specialist to the schools.

Similarly, the senior central office administrator overseeing the reorganization and reculturing process in Oakland regularly convened several principal advisory

groups that provided input on their efforts. The leadership of the ESO in NYC convened principals in a quarterly meeting of Principals Council where they discussed various changes in the central office and solicited principals' feedback on them.

Central office staff in each district also developed and implemented a regular survey to capture principals' feedback on various aspects of their reorganization and reculturing efforts. For instance, in Oakland, central office administrators created the Use Your Voice survey, based in part on a long standing model from Edmonton, Alberta (Canada), which asked principals and community members detailed questions about their experience with the central office and, in the case of community members, their experience with schools. Central office units also surveyed principals and other relevant constituencies about their performance. Likewise, in New York City, central office administrators in the Office of Assessment and Accountability, with participation from other units, developed surveys to gauge principals' satisfaction with central office services.

Principals reported that particular central office administrators took informal opportunities to collect information from them and how they used that information to effect central office changes as part of their reorganization and reculturing efforts. For instance, one principal described how, whenever he ran into one of those central office staff people in the hallway of the central office, she always stopped and asked how things were going,

> … And I really tell her … Last year [for example] we had a really hard time and I think this is district-wide, attracting and retaining quality qualified teachers. So I refuse to keep people who should not be with kids. So I keep dismissing people at the end of the year. But I get the same thing back. The same quality … .

This person went on to describe how last year the teachers were not only low quality but they were also new to teaching and not teaching well.

> So I was really struggling with how to support so many new people … So [the central office staff person] e-mailed me saying, "Glad we had that conversation [in the hallway]. I'm going to look at how we can support schools that are going through this." And I believe from that came this idea of intensive support for teachers. So they sent somebody out to do intensive support with one of the teachers and that was a direct response to that conversation.

As another principal corroborated, "I think [two central office staff people leading the reorganization and reculturing effort] have really helped streamline a lot of things at the district level that need a lot of work … . And I think they've really done a great job of keeping their eyes and ears open, having meetings, having focus groups … really putting ideas into action."

As the above examples show, ***central office administrators in these systems not only collected data, they also intentionally used those data to change how the central office operated.*** For example, in Oakland, central office administrators used findings from the conversations on the principal advisory groups as well as the Use Your Voice survey to develop a Service Scorecard for each central office unit. As its main architect described, the Scorecard "highlights their key services and the standard to which those service will be delivered, and progress toward those goals." This administrator then used the Scorecards in meetings with central office staff to engage them in challenging conversations about their progress with improving their service to schools. Data from the Scorecards was the starting point for productive retreat conversations, among other instances, that identified and set in motion projects aimed at improving the functioning of central office units concerned with facilities maintenance, management of teacher substitutes, and payroll accuracy, among other targets. In subsequent work on these projects, staff continued to use evidence to monitor their progress.

Respondents throughout the central offices generally reported that these efforts to systematically and regularly collect and use multiple forms of evidence to inform their reorganization and reculturing efforts were fundamental to their progress. As one central office administrator in Oakland explained, "If you really just listen to principals you would think there's never a sub [substitute teacher] in any class at any day. But when you say … —'We're at 77 [percent rate of filling principals' requests for substitutes] this month. We're trying to get to 80 next month and here's what we're doing'—those data shift the conversation from blame to problem-solving." The administrator went on to describe that one of the problems with the old central office was the "lack of being data-driven … . And I think … central office has suffered from that just as much as schools have suffered" in the sense that the absence of data fueled a sense that nothing was working and a culture of blame. The administrator went on to explain,

> And the more we have data to tell our story about, well here's how we're really doing and you can perceive it however you want. But actually what happens is when you start using data you start changing your perceptions of people. So that's

> why I'm training my managers on how to do that and be very data driven. And be almost like a coach of a baseball team that's using their stats all the time.

As the comment immediately above suggests, use of ***evidence strengthened the reorganization and reculturing efforts not only by infusing the change process with input and new ideas but also by helping create a feeling among central office staff that they were being listened to and acknowledged for their work—a key resource for reculturing in organizations where staff may have felt unrecognized, criticized, or outright demoralized.***

New York City/Empowerment Schools Organization (ESO) stood out for efforts to use not only school performance and principal satisfaction feedback but also feedback from network leaders as key evidence for information their reorganization and reculturing efforts. Certain central office staff people described that part of their job involved collecting information about network leaders' experience and passing it on to senior central office staff to help guide the reorganization and reculturing effort. In the words of one,

> I … work with the Network Leaders … . I interact with them a lot again and particularly in this air traffic control sense … . Where there are things that are not working for them – helping surface that up to [ESO leadership] in places so that we can come up with things [we should change], like an aspect or a component of this performance management system that we've been working on.

Central office staff also used feedback from network leaders to inform their decisions to expand the scope of the ESOs work to absorb some of the central office functions that network leaders reported were not being carried out well by others—that is, to reorganize and reculture the rest of the central office by assigning certain lines of work to their own staff who might perform the work at a higher level of quality. In one instance, network leaders shared with executive central office administrators that the central office unit responsible for special education placements had been sending students to schools that had no openings. In one network leader's words, "They were sending 15 kids to a school that had only 12 openings for special ed … . Nobody seemed to know what was going on. So as empowerment leaders, we expressed this all to our empowerment organization." This network leader went on to describe meeting with ESO leaders who decided to shift responsibility for special education placements in ESO schools from the regular central office unit that served all the school support organizations to the student services managers on their network team. Under the new system, network

team staff members were to work within their network to "juggle it around within your own network. And then if you've exhausted all that, then you could go to your sister network or your brother network." Network leaders reported that this arrangement solved the special education placement problem but created the new problem of taking excessive staff time away from working with schools on other matters. In response, the network leaders developed a plan to hire someone to help with the placements and the ESO leadership agreed.

In another example, central office staff routinely collected feedback from network leaders that the Integrated Services Centers (ISCs), the central office units established to handle basic operational transactions for all the schools in certain geographic regions, were not serving their schools well. Executive ESO staff responded, in part, by piloting the Children First Network (CFN) that added eight other staff members to carry out the operational functions that otherwise fell under the ISCs' umbrella. Our observations of this pilot revealed that ESO central staff routinely consulted with CFN staff members to understand their experiences and inform their decision about whether and how to expand the pilot. As one member of the network pilot described,

> We had a lot of meetings with [ESO central staff] … . We met with the Chancellor and with [the head of budget] … . The Chancellor had an audience with us to ask us whether we think the CFN is terrific for us or not and if we would recommend it getting larger, or developing new CFN models … And … after … they agreed to do it and so obviously they … heard us [that]… there are not enough hours in the day or days in the week [for us] to spend time doing things four times over. You have to do things one time and get it done well and so as a principal there are so many things that happen that you don't have time to work on … . You should be spending your time doing what's important which is the leadership in the school and the instructional leadership.

The experience of central office leaders in Atlanta reinforces that such evidence use processes are ongoing and fundamental to the work of reorganization and reculturing central office units, even nine years into the work, in part because the nature of the work is not to implement a fixed model but to continually adapt. As one central office administrator described,

> What's different [over these years of our transformation effort] is I'm more in tune now on my improving as a leader to better support the people who count on me… than ever before. I think for a couple of reasons. I think because in Atlanta Public

> Schools we do the technical work at a very high level, but now it really is about the adaptive work … especially since we've done what all school systems say they should be doing, but very few have at a system-wide level. And that is almost narrow or flatten the achievement gap between us and the State at the elementary. And then when you really look at it, a school system that has eight years of continuous movement in a positive way. That trajectory is very rare, because you usually see peaks and valleys, no matter who the superintendent is, even if they happen to have a superintendent that stays longer than 2 or 3 years. So given that, there aren't very clear packages of what to do next. And I really paid attention to this piece.

This administrator went on to describe that he continually consults with evidence of how well the reorganization and reculturing process is working to inform his own participation in the process. The administrator reflected, "That really was part of *my* learning."

Use of Evidence to Ground the Stewardship of Central Office Transformation (Dimension 4)

Use of evidence also appeared essential and consequential to the stewardship of the central office transformation effort. For example, central staff of the Empowerment Schools Organization (ESO) in New York City routinely used their meetings with network leaders, particularly during the second half of the 2007–08 academic year, to present new draft models of ESO organization and engage network leaders in extended conversations about the pros and cons of the models for the central office transformation effort moving forward. As one ESO central staff person framed one of those conversations at a network leader meeting, the purposes of such conversations included, "to get a sense of what you have learned this year and what you are thinking about for the future and what you think I need to be thinking about for the future." Similarly, another central office staff person described convening smaller groups of network leaders to inform the development of the ESO's overall strategic direction around instructional improvement. As one staff person described this effort, the emerging instructional model, came from…

> … the best of the knowledge of the people in these five networks … . And so as a result of me coming together with them with their practical knowledge and my calling it more research-based knowledge and more policy-based knowledge, it's been very exciting. It fuses together some of the best of those two worlds and it really brings people to the table.

Network leaders generally reported that, especially compared to the previous year, central office staff, not only in the ESO but throughout the system, seemed to be trying to learn from their experience to inform the ongoing development of the central office transformation effort. In the words of one, "listening going on" is "so astronomically different" and "better." As one network leader described, "Joel Klein [New York City Public Schools chancellor] is one of the best listeners I've ever met in my life." This person explained that though rarely in direct touch with him, "indirectly we know that what we say goes through [one ESO staff person], goes to [another ESO staff person], goes to Joel, and I think that's pretty cool. So I might not feel directly listened to, but I think indirectly I feel that the kind of things that we've been able to push are the case."

Here, too, ***central office staff did not just collect information but they actually used it to inform their stewardship of central office transformation—and their way of doing so reflected the notion that stewardship implies ongoing learning by leaders within the system about how to design, implement, and support the central office transformation effort.*** As one central office administrator from Atlanta reflected, that shift in orientation in working with evidence was…

> … a growth piece for me because living urban education as long as I have and knowing that usually you're at the brunt of people's criticism, it's hard not to just naturally want to defend [what we are doing] or think that … they [those outside the central office] just don't trust us, they don't think we know anything [and not consult with them] … But over time … I do far less of the defense and getting angry … What I [now] tend to do [if I receive negative feedback] is say, "Mmmm. We probably weren't clear or it sounds like the parent is really frustrated about the change [and] they need some more hand holding."

In Oakland, we found evidence that executive central office staff solicited feedback on their stewardship of the central office transformation effort. Those staff also seemed to use that evidence, mainly to inform their decisions to communicate about their theory of action for central office transformation. For example, the East Bay Community Foundation funded and staffed a major effort to convene a series of more than 40 "community engagements" across the district. At the engagements, a facilitator from the host organization engaged community members in providing feedback to the school district on their central office transformation effort and other aspects of their "Expect Success" initiative. We observed how one central office staff person generally attended these meetings and

spent most of the time listening to the conversation and occasionally urging participants to provide honest and direct feedback, promising the group that the input would be brought back to the rest of the central office. Likewise, two central office staff people convened the principal advisory groups mentioned earlier in part to solicit their feedback on various strategic initiatives within the central office. Executive central office staff reported that they learned from those meetings as well as the Use Your Voice survey that principals and community members generally did not understand the theory of action underlying the central office transformation effort, particularly when it came to the new results-based budgeting system. Nor did people outside the central office know who the staff members on the executive-level strategy team were or what they were responsible for. In response, Strategy Team members increased the frequency of school visits.

However, we found limited to no evidence that the high-level central office staff people in Oakland used the evidence collected through the engagements, advisory groups, or surveys to inform other dimensions of the stewardship of the central office transformation effort. The Oakland example, corroborated with evidence from New York City, reinforces that ***evidence use is important to stewardship not only for the information it provides to central office staff but also for the feeling it creates among some staff that they are valued participants in the central office change process, fundamental to creating a culture of change and improvement with the central offices.*** To elaborate, NExOs generally reported that they believed they had been hired to participate in the stewardship of the central office transformation effort but that they generally were not involved in or consulted about those aspects of the change process. As one NExO commented,

> I would like to be at the table with Strategy Team … to really discuss the big picture. And that's just not going to happen because … that's not their belief system. And so that's been a big reality check I think for all of us. And some people are saying, "well now I know that this might not be the job for me." I've heard people say that.

Another leader expressed similar frustration and gave the example of senior central office staff convening a lunch for their principals but not taking the opportunity to engage people in a conversation about how the work was going.

> Either you want us on your team and either you want to build that loyalty or you don't. And that's not to say we need to be involved in every decision. But there's a process of information transfer and input solicitation that's not hard to do. [Our

> relationship is] not structured in a way that it's co-reflections. That we are partners. That's not good.

A significant number of NExOs attributed the turnover of NExOs (half of whom had left their position at the end of our data collection period) to their limited opportunities to participate in discussions of stewardship. Similarly, some attributed the turnover of some network leaders in NYC to disagreements with the direction of the central office transformation effort, particularly the design of the accountability system, and their limited influence on those aspects of the central office transformation process.

Summary

In sum, central office administrators in all three districts intentionally collected evidence about their experience with the central office transformation process and worked to incorporate that evidence into their ongoing decisions about how to strengthen their work. We documented that these use-of-evidence processes were part of all four dimensions of central office transformation. Because these processes were such a prominent and promising aspect of central office transformation, we report them as a dimension of central office transformation in and of their own right.

CHAPTER 7

What the Study Says about Central Offices and the System-wide Improvement of Teaching and Learning

By focusing on the daily work of central office administrators, the findings in this report contribute substantially to knowledge about how central offices matter to the fundamental goals of teaching and learning improvement, and provide important guidelines for practitioners interested in strengthening central office leadership for realizing ambitious educational outcomes. Our findings reveal that ***central office transformation moves beyond old debates in education about whether schools or the central office should be driving reform and show that improving teaching and learning district-wide is a systems problem***—a challenge that requires the participation of both central offices and schools in leadership roles to realize such outcomes.

The tug and pull over where control for decisions about how to improve teaching and learning ought to reside—in arrangements that decentralize control and resources to the schools or in systems that assert strong and coherent control from the center—unnecessarily and unproductively dichotomizes the problem confronting school district leaders. This study makes it clear that both are needed, and that the real question is not *at what level* but *how* within and across levels. Creating entire systems of excellent schools requires the exercise of leadership throughout district systems. Our close examination of central office practice clearly suggests that work at both levels is absolutely essential to the creation of a system of schools that can serve children and young people well. Each of the districts we studied recognized early on in their respective reform efforts that the work people in the central office did, and how they did it, mattered in the service of better supporting schools in making productive changes in teaching and learning. Moreover, central offices that intentionally set out to improve teaching and learning as *joint work* with schools created the basis for ongoing dialogue about where and how efforts are and are not working, and where more support is needed, enabling smarter, more transparent decisions about how to allocate limited resources.

How Central Offices Can Engage in District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement

More specifically, this study's findings show that when central offices participate productively in teaching and learning improvement, ***everyone in the central office orients their work in meaningful ways toward supporting the development of schools' capacity for high-quality teaching and expanding students' opportunities to learn.*** This orientation toward teaching and learning throughout the central office moves far beyond rhetoric. As Atlanta superintendent Beverly Hall has said, "Every superintendent in America goes in [to the role] and says 'this is about the children.' I haven't met one yet who hasn't said 'children first'.[22] Despite this rhetoric, central offices rarely act as if the children come first, perhaps because it is not obvious how to do so or what this means for the many kinds of staff who inhabit central offices. Findings from our research can be used to demonstrate how. Leaders throughout the central offices we studied are putting their work where their rhetoric is and trying to orient what they do toward support for teaching and learning improvement in all their schools.

As the report elaborates, we found that across three different systems, leaders were working to reorient their work along five dimensions that touched on all central office administrators' roles and responsibilities. These five dimensions provide new insight into the daily practice of central office leadership for system-wide teaching and learning improvement. Specifically, ***central office administrators were likely to make substantial contributions to those outcomes when they (1) develop learning-focused partnerships with school principals to deepen principals' instructional leadership practice, (2) provide professional learning assistance to those partnerships, (3) reorganize and reculture the rest of central office units to support those partnerships, (4) steward overall transformation processes continuously, and (5) rely on evidence of various kinds to continually refine practice.***

These findings highlight that what fundamentally distinguishes central office transformation as a reform is its unrelenting focus on central office administrators' engagement in leadership practices that support improvements in teaching and learning in schools. On the surface, the activities we report on here might be confused with other kinds of district-wide reforms that call for central office reorganization through restructuring of units, organizational relationships, work

[22] Webcast from the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, originally broadcast March 26, 2009. http://wm.nmmstream.net/genasx/learningpt/250309bwmv58209.asx, downloaded 8.7.09.

roles, reporting channels, accountability systems, and the like. Efforts such as these to revitalize school districts, accompanied by significant reallocation of district resources aimed at a variety of reform targets, are numerous. Such efforts may resemble central office transformation at first glance, in part, because the transformation process, as we have described it, clearly involves significant structural change. District leaders, for example, did create new network team structures which schools in New York City could opt to join; or split apart Atlanta into geographically distinct school reform team groupings among the K–8 schools; or set up new operational support units in Oakland.

However, while the formal structural changes within these central offices helped promote central office administrators' engagement in new practices, the changes in structure were not, and will never be, sufficient to fuel the practice shifts that transformation involves. ***Within new structures, and in the conduct of people in new roles in these systems, real changes in daily work practice were the focus of transformation, and were the aspects of transformation that held promise of actually improving teaching and learning. The overarching lesson is clear—if the practice doesn't change, it isn't central office transformation, and improved teaching and learning is unlikely to result.***

Deep, sustainable changes in practice, furthermore, are not likely to occur spontaneously, or without concentrated attention to building capacity. ***Intentional efforts to build the capacity of people throughout district transformation initiatives seemed fundamental to the implementation of these initiatives.*** For example, central office staff (with various position titles) who we referred to as "Instructional Leadership Directors" (ILDs) specialized in building principals' capacity for instructional leadership. In turn, other central office administrators focused on strengthening ILDs' ability to engage in that work. The reorganizing and reculturing of the rest of the central office hinged fundamentally on restaffing and retraining. These capacity building efforts were a far cry from the sit-and-get, workshop-style professional development opportunities available in many school systems. Rather, the transformation efforts involved ongoing, job-embedded supports for school and central office leaders alike and the continuous use of evidence from experience to improve the quality of those supports.

Finally, our findings highlight the ***centrality of leaders taking a continuous improvement approach to their work in the process of central office transformation.*** Given that this is a new way of working, the importance of people "learning

their way into the work" as it unfolded cannot be overemphasized. Continuous improvement meant leaders were always trying to learn from their efforts and apply those lessons to the ongoing improvements in practice. This stance is supported by various research on organizational learning (e.g., Argyris & Schön, 1996, and others previously noted) and more recent formulations of continuous improvement in schools (Smylie, in press), that suggests inquiry into practice is a foundational leadership endeavor. The continuous improvement orientation to transforming the central office requires leaders to engage in their own continuous learning from the work, paying attention to whether the outcomes that are intended for improvements in teaching and learning are being realized, and inquiring about why or why not. All three of our sites, each in their own way, embraced the idea that the work needs to produce tangible outcomes for principals' practice and for schools in general, and when it doesn't, this creates a learning opportunity.

Taking Steps toward Central Office Transformation

We present some concluding recommendations that can be helpful for central office leaders who are considering taking on central office transformation in their own contexts.

RECOMMENDATION 1. District leaders seeking to improve teaching and learning district-wide need to engage in central office transformation as a focal point of their efforts. While this may seem counterintuitive, the most powerful ways to change teaching and learning in schools are likely to prominently feature vigorous efforts to change central office work practice at the same time.

District leaders who read this report are no doubt already running school systems that have undertaken all kinds of reform efforts, underwritten by theories of action that outline how those various efforts are likely to improve teaching and learning. What research tells us is that virtually all existing reform work has focused squarely on changing practices in schools, without much attention to the implications of those school-level reforms for central office practice. District leaders should first understand that central office transformation is promising *in its own right* as an approach for improving teaching and learning district-wide.

District leaders should think about what central office transformation will mean for their contexts. For leaders used to overseeing a management structure devoted to oversight of busses, budgets, and buildings, redefining the focus around the

core work of improving teaching and learning will likely feel very new and very different. Leaders might consider what new ways of thinking about their work are implied by the findings, perhaps starting with taking stock of what the central office practice looks like at present, and envisioning what the changes suggested in our findings would mean.

Taking on central office transformation does not mean that districts should stop investing directly in other efforts to improve classroom teaching and learning, such as initiatives aimed at curriculum renewal, instructional coaching for classroom teachers, teacher recruitment, and various forms of student academic support. Rather, central office transformation complements direct classroom investments by increasing central office leaders' abilities to grow the capacity of school principals to exercise instructional leadership in schools. Put another way, transforming the central office is a way to build a better *support system* for efforts to improve classroom teaching and other school-level improvements that may strengthen students' opportunities to learn. Leaders who are considering taking on the work of transforming the central office ought to consider the fit with other reforms currently under way that target the classroom, and whether there are ways to integrate the changes in central office practice with existing efforts at reform.

That said, as we write, each of the districts we studied continues to struggle with aspects of implementing central office transformation. Despite an admirable record of accomplishment in Atlanta Public Schools, leaders in this district would easily generate a long list of the challenges that remain with improving central office practice, even after ten years into the work. We know also from the experiences in Oakland Unified School District that increased accountability demands from the state and elsewhere have continued to obscure and distract system leaders from the important transformation work, as have the acute budget shortages in all districts. Many school systems currently face similar kinds of demands.

As these examples underscore, central office transformation is very challenging, new work. Central office administrators engaging in transformation should expect this to be the case, but to simultaneously anticipate and embrace those challenges and respond with strategies that focus on building capacity to do the work. Those who fail to understand the intensity of what the central office transformation approach entails, and make adequate investments in engaging in such work, risk misappropriating reform ideas and otherwise incompletely engaging in implementation.

RECOMMENDATION 2. District leaders should start the work of transformation by developing a theory of action for how central office practice in their particular context contributes to improving teaching and learning, and plan to revise this as the work unfolds.

Central office transformation is not a general approach to improving the efficiency or performance of central office bureaucracies. Rather, this approach aims fundamentally to strengthen teaching and learning in schools. Accordingly, however central office leaders choose to begin and develop such a reform approach in their own setting, they should start with a theory of action that ties their first and ongoing steps clearly and directly to teaching and learning improvement. Put another way, their strategy for changing central office structures, work practices, relationships, etc., must explicitly consider how each change connects causally to instructional improvement work.

Why start with a theory of action? The process of developing a theory of action demands that leaders not only articulate what they are intending to do (e.g., what strategies they are choosing, or what solutions they are pursuing) but also why those are the right strategies or solutions to pursue. A theory of action begs a rationale for the work. Without this all-important step in planning, leaders run the risk of heading down a path that is not well grounded in a sound rationale, and that ultimately may result in different outcomes than those that are intended.

The theory of action should clearly and logically lay out the rationale for the work—if we as central office leaders practice in X new ways, then we can expect principals to be able to practice in Y new ways, which will result in outcomes A, B, and C for improvements in teaching and student learning. District leaders might think about developing an "elevator speech" about the theory of action for this work that they can communicate briefly, succinctly, and powerfully to a variety of local audiences implicated in the work (school board, central office staff, school staff, community stakeholders).

Starting with the development of a theory of action provides an opportunity for district leaders to grapple with the findings from this research and what they mean in their local contexts. Leaders must take into account the contextual conditions they face in their districts; there is no set formula to be applied here, no particular model to be chosen, no program to be purchased. While we found a number of common types of activities that defined the approach to central office transforma-

tion in the three study districts, another lesson was that district context mattered greatly in specific choices district leaders made about how to approach the work.

That said, while it is clear from the study that there are many different entry points and facets to any given district's approach to this work, there are some logical places to start. Our study emphasizes, for example, that *the interface between district and school is the crux of central office transformation*. District leaders should consider the current state of the relationship between central office and schools, and ask how—and how regularly—central office staff ask or assess what kinds of supports schools could benefit from, what supports they actually receive, and how those supports address expressed needs at the school level.

In addition, the theory of action districts begin with will necessarily require attention and possible adjustment, as part of the *stewardship* of the transformation process. District leaders who take on the work of central office transformation will need to start somewhere, perhaps piloting some of these ideas in one part of the central office, and growing the effort through ongoing learning from outcomes. As the work develops, leaders will need to pay attention to evidence of progress—is what we expected to occur actually occurring? And if not, changes in the theory of action will likely need to follow. All three of our study districts began their central office transformation efforts with significant direct or indirect pilot periods during which time central office leaders established and elaborated a basic design and initial underlying theory of action to guide the reform effort. The New York City/Empowerment Schools Organization grew out of a pilot effort started with a handful of schools, from which leaders learned lessons they applied later as the reform grew into a much larger systemic effort. The transformation process in the Atlanta Public Schools grew from a focus on ten of the poorest performing schools in the system and accompanying initiatives to drive resources and supports to help those schools rapidly improve. These activities caused new learning that subsequently shaped the broader system-wide transformation work. In Oakland, transformation work started in one part of the central office, and spread from there. And, in all three sites, the work evolved in context, guided by the stewardship of key central office leaders. District leaders who take on this work will need to exercise sustained leadership in seeding and supporting the implementation and ongoing development of the effort.

RECOMMENDATION 3. Invest substantially in people to lead the work throughout the central office, and especially at the interface between the central office and schools.

As our analysis suggests, central office transformation is complex and intense, demanding administrators throughout the central office dig down to the level of day-to-day work practices and how they understand the nature of their work and their relationships with schools. This is not a set of changes that will happen easily, or without significant investments of time, energy, and resources—most importantly resources in the form of people.

Central offices were not established, historically, to focus directly on supporting improvements in teaching and learning. As our report clearly shows, doing this work well requires people who have an understanding of what the work of improving teaching and learning looks like, and how to lead for it. Accordingly, district leaders interested in central office transformation should not simply assume that their central offices are staffed with the right people for this work. As we found across our three sites, district leaders moving forward with central office transformation efforts will likely need to focus on strategic hiring—which also may call for judicious removal of certain central office staff and school principals.

Moreover, since central office transformation specifically targets ongoing improvement in the practice of those in the central office—changing what people do, including how they work with each other in service of supporting schools—district leaders also need to invest in the ongoing development of those people, both newcomers and veterans. Building capacity to lead the work of improving teaching and learning is a continuous endeavor; even those leaders who are most expert can continue to improve their practice. Our findings suggest the importance of all five dimensions of central office transformation working in concert. Progress toward realizing the theories of action underneath transformation relies on all these parts of the work moving together, which means the continual development of people in all parts of the central office.

At the same time, *our analysis also signals the centrality of the work, highlighted in Dimension 1, that occurs within the relationship between school principals and whatever central office staff take on the role of "Instructional Leadership Director"(ILD).* The central office reform effort runs through this crucial relationship, and circles around teaching and learning improvement in classrooms, helping principals and other school-level leaders learn what they need to learn so as to be

able to lead this work in schools day-to-day, and helping people in central offices continually get smarter about how they support school level leaders to know the work, lead the work, and realize improvements in the work.

To maximize the promise of central office transformation for improving teaching and learning, working through the ILD-principal relationship is absolutely crucial. In larger districts, it may be possible to do as the districts we studied did and create wholly new central office positions, call them by a new name, and in the process redefine the practice that occurs in the relationship. In smaller districts, hiring new people may not be possible or even desirable, and many central office functions need to be accomplished by one or two people. Regardless of district size, someone needs to do this work of supporting schools through regular direct contact with school principals; developing this relationship is central to transforming the central office.

RECOMMENDATION 4. Start now with engaging key stakeholders, political supporters, and potential funders in understanding that central office transformation is important and requires sustained commitment.

Transformation requires key partners who understand the work and how it matters. For example, each of the three systems we studied had external support providers—foundations and business people, among others—as key strategic partners that invested in the work. What they were investing in was the work of the central office, not just in individual schools or a specific programmatic approach. For many funders, this may be a very new way of thinking about investment in educational reform. Central office transformation calls for a shift in mindset, embracing the idea that central office practice matters for improving teaching and learning, and moving from short-term support for programs or projects to longer-term investments in developing leaders' practice. District leaders ought to consider what steps they will take to keep key stakeholders informed and supportive of these transformation efforts, and not just assume that people will understand why the focus on central office practice matters so much.[23] Focusing on central office practice is not the norm in reform conversations.

Moreover, this work requires stamina to stay the course over time. As the examples of Atlanta, New York City, and Oakland reveal, central office transformation

[23] See the discussion in a companion study (Plecki et al., 2009) concerning what district leaders do to "shepherd the equity conversation" over time. A similar and difficult process is involved, that entails an ongoing conversation with key stakeholders to make a case for a different ways of doing business in reforming education.

is not the kind of work that districts do once and then move on. Rather, it sets in motion new ways of working that will never end, but hopefully improve with time and experience. Not all important reform partners—including school board members, community members, and representatives of external support organizations—come to reform with the resolve or staying power that complex, long-term work demands. Evidence from our study suggests that changes in central office practice may not (and likely will not) register quick gains in students' achievement scores. Rather, this approach to reform bets on a longer trajectory, that over time good results will come from central office practice that takes the improvement of teaching and learning as the primary goal.

Conclusion

In defining and elaborating on-the-ground details of the practice of central office transformation, this study is among the first and most comprehensive efforts toward filling the gap in existing knowledge about the work practices of central office leaders, and improves on a number of concerns with existing district research we identified earlier. This work moves beyond the notion of the district as a single background variable or "monolithic actor" in implementation (Spillane, 1998). Our findings highlight the varied people, units, work practices, and other conditions within urban school district central offices that seem to matter to district-wide teaching and learning improvements. Further, the robust methodological approach to data collection and analysis of central office practices responds to shortcomings associated with district research to date (e.g., one-time interviews with a small handful of central office administrators or school principals' and teachers' responses to a survey about the performance of their central offices). Further, we studied the work of three districts that were actively and intentionally trying to change their central office practice for the better, avoiding the tendency toward "autopsy research" (McLaughlin, 2006) that chronicles what district central offices ought not to do when it comes to teaching and learning improvement, and not exploring how to enable the desired outcomes.

Asking for and expecting improvements in teaching and learning is a policy imperative that all districts face. Not only is a focus on learning for all a commitment of public education systems in the United States from the federal to the local level, it is the right thing for districts to do. What central office transformation adds in the current landscape of policy efforts is specific, concrete images of how to move school systems to a place where all teachers are working to teach at the

highest levels, and all principals are capable of leading that work. Doing this well implies changes in everyone's practice in the central office, not just changes in what teachers or principals do. If school district leaders take seriously the challenge of teaching "all" students at ever-higher levels, then everyone's work must be fundamentally reoriented around that goal.

Central office transformation represents an exciting and promising new reform approach to improving teaching and learning across school systems. As evidence from the practices we observed in our study sites reveals, the work is complex, challenging, but ultimately very much worth doing. The experience of the three districts chronicled here shines new light on how entire school systems can organize to support district-wide teaching and learning improvement.

Methodological Appendix

In this appendix, we briefly elaborate on our methods of data collection and analysis. To begin, we note the central role that a carefully developed conceptual framework played in both the design of data collection strategies and in the analysis of data we collected.

Conceptual Framework Guiding Data Collection and Analysis

We designed our data collection instruments and framed our analytic work using a conceptual framework derived from socio-cultural learning theory (e.g., Lave, 1998; Rogoff, 1994; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and organizational learning theory (e.g., Levitt & March, 1998). (For a detailed discussion of our conceptual framework, see Honig, 2008.) We chose these strands of learning theory, in part, because recent studies of school district central offices, including some studies of our own (see Chapter 1), had productively framed central office administrators' participation in educational improvement as a challenge of central office learning. In our own prior research, we demonstrated how socio-cultural learning theory and organizational learning theory, in particular, describe work practices and activities consistent with the design of central office transformation in our three districts.

In particular, socio-cultural learning theory identifies specific practices involved in assistance relationships—relationships in which people work together to strengthen how they go about their work. These work practices called our attention to particular aspects of how central office administrators in each district worked directly with school principals to strengthen principals' instructional leadership practice. However, we assumed that not all central office administrators would be engaged in such direct assistance relationships. Rather, other central office administrators would be trying to learn from the experience of their colleagues in those relationships and from the experience of schools more broadly to inform their own efforts to support teaching and learning in schools. Concepts from organizational learning theory (specifically trial-and-error learning or learning from experience) called our attention to the extent to which other central office administrators were searching for that experience-based evidence and using it to inform their decisions about their own work practices (for an elaboration of the specific concepts that anchored our conceptual framework for data collection, please see Honig, 2008).

Overall, these theories helped us move beyond the general notion that central offices should support school improvement to look for specific work practices and activities that might be involved in the implementation of such an idea. Given the dizzying array of activities involved in the three transforming central offices, our conceptual framework prompted us to make strategic and ultimately extremely productive choices to invest significantly in the collection of data about the work of central office administrators in each system who were positioned to support principals' instructional leadership. Our conceptual framework also helped us move beyond simple descriptions of what other central office administrators were doing to probe more deeply into how their work related, if at all, to the principal learning support relationships.

Data Collection

Our data collection methods involved observations, interviews, and document reviews. Data was collected by a team of researchers primarily during the 2007–08 school year (and in one case, began the preceding spring), through repeated visits to the sites, supplemented by ongoing data collection by on-site data collection staff.

Observations

Observations of how central office transformation unfolded in real time proved especially important to the study's attempt to focus on central office administrators' daily work. In each school district we took advantage of different observation opportunities. In Atlanta, we sampled a selection of central office administrators' work days and in each instance shadowed them throughout the entire day. During shadowing observations we wrote notes in long hand and, periodically throughout the day, typed elaborated field notes that included mostly rich description punctuated with direct quotes. Because we were trying to capture the full breadth of central office administrators' work, we wrote highly descriptive notes about all the activities we observed while shadowing. When possible, we taped conversations between central office administrators and school principals that happened to occur during our shadowing observations.

In New York City, the Empowerment Schools Organization (ESO) convened key central office staff (the network leaders who worked in direct learning partnerships with principals) twice each month for at least two hours to discuss the central

office transformation process and to engage ESO staff in conversations about how to improve the quality of their work to support principals. We contracted with two field researchers who observed virtually all of these meetings during our study period and produced verbatim transcripts of conversations during those meetings. The notes were so detailed that most totaled over 50 single-spaced pages per meeting. Our New York field researchers also sampled meetings of other central office administrators and a council of school principals convened by ESO leaders to provide input on the central office's work work.

Similarly, in Oakland we regularly observed a series of central office meetings relevant to the central office transformation process. An on-site field researcher constructed verbatim transcripts of virtually all twice-monthly meetings of the Education Leadership Organization (ELO), which convened the Network Executive Officers (NExO) who worked directly with school principals on their instructional leadership practice. One formal purpose of the ELO meetings was to engage NExOs in conversations with each other as well as with senior central office administrators to inform practice and the overall central office transformation process. We also observed monthly "Coordinators" Meetings at which the NExOs, senior central office administrators, and central office operations staff addressed mainly operational issues as part of the central office transformation process. In addition, between November of 2007 and June of 2008, we observed 25 meetings of principal networks convened by six of the eight NExOs. We observed between three to 10 meetings convened by each NExO that ran between two-six For district leaders who want to engage in central office transformation, hours in length. During these observations the field researcher as well as members of our main research team constructed verbatim transcripts of conversations during the meetings as well as descriptions of activities.

Interviews

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with central office administrators, school principals, and representatives from outside organizations involved in, or otherwise in a position to comment on, the central office transformation effort (e.g., school reform support organizations, foundations). We interviewed central office staff most centrally involved in the central office transformation process an average of three-four times per respondent. In all, we conducted 282 interviews with 162 respondents. In our interviews we probed for concrete, albeit self-report, data on central office administrators' actual work experiences. For example, three

times during our study period we asked each of the Instructional Leadership Directors to walk us through their calendars for the preceding weeks and describe how they had been using their time during that period. We asked for specific examples of reported practices and activities and for evidence of how typical their practices and activities were. In interviews with school principals, we focused on confirming or disconfirming central office administrators' reports and our observations of central office administrators' work with school principals.

Documents

Various documents helped us understand the design of the central office transformation effort at each site, communication and other dimensions of the relationships between central office administrators and school principals, and how central office administrators worked with school principals to improve their instructional leadership practice. For example, central office administrators generated curricular materials or material we refer to as "tools" (see Chapter 2). We focused our collection of documents on those that provided some evidence of how central office administrators worked with schools on teaching and learning improvement as well as documents that described the overall central office transformation process and its underlying rationale.

Data Analysis

We coded our data using NVIVO 8 software in several phases over 16 months of carefully scrutinizing our data for reliable patterns. During our initial coding phase we distinguished all data by type of data source to help us triangulate our findings and track developments over time. Our main analytic work in this phase involved coding data using an initial set of broad and relatively low-inference codes derived from our conceptual framework. For example, socio-cultural learning theory called our attention to whether or not central office administrators working directly with school principals modeled instructional leadership practice. While we had the theoretical definition of modeling in view during this coding phase, we did not carefully distinguish modeling from other forms of coaching. We created broad categories to separate out how other central office administrators participated in implementation. During this phase we also coded for any data that seemed to relate to the outcomes of the central office transformation process using simple categories to distinguish outcomes for principals, schools, and the district overall. We cast a broad net when coding for outcome data and included any evidence of

the results of the central office transformation efforts (e.g., information regarding process outcomes such as the level of resources provided to principals for their instructional leadership; data concerning status outcomes such as changes in actual leadership practice).

In the second, "recoding" phase, we went back into our data, this time through the codes used in the first phase, and further scrutinized whether or not the data coded in the first phase actually fit the construct and we recoded those data using codes at a higher level of inference. For example, in this phase we looked carefully at all our data categorized as "modeling principals' instructional leadership practice" and distinguished evidence that specifically fit the definition of modeling in our conceptual framework. In a third phase, which we called "reducing," we took another pass through our data set to collapse redundant categories and eliminate categories whose points we could not substantiate with at least three different data sources (either a combination of interviews, observations, and documents, or self-reports of at least three different respondents). By this phase we had identified the five dimensions of central office transformation that we use to organize our findings.

During this phase we also linked central office work practices with outcomes when we could justify those associations with at least three different data sources. We linked different work practices with different outcomes in the following ways which we also summarize at the start of each chapter in the findings:

- ***Dimension 1: Identifying more and less promising practices in the ILD-principal partnerships.*** In our findings about the central office-school principal learning partnerships, we distinguish practices that we argue actually had, or promised to have, a greater positive impact on principals' instructional leadership from those that were likely to have less impact. To distinguish those practices, we first used our conceptual framework to sort data about how the ILDs worked with school principals. As noted above and elaborated in another publication (Honig, 2008), the research from which we derived that conceptual framework shows that those practices have demonstrated power for helping other professionals improve their work practice across a variety of workplaces and arenas. Accordingly, we viewed those practices as indicating potentially high-impact practices. We corroborated those practices with our first-hand observations of ILDs' practice in Atlanta and Oakland and our extensive observations of how ILDs in New York City talked about their practice with

colleagues in meetings. We found that all but one of the concepts from our conceptual framework helped us distinguish among ILDs' work with principals, and we added a category not anticipated by our conceptual framework (i.e., "differentiating supports") to help capture an additional dimension of our findings. While no one ILD demonstrated all of those practices at a high level with all their principals, in each system we were able to distinguish among ILDs who engaged in those practices most of the time, often, or seldom/not at all.

We corroborated those distinctions with data from interviews. Specifically, in our interviews we collected reports from school principals about the quality of supports they believed they received from their ILDs as well as reports from other central office administrators about the relative strength of individual ILDs in supporting principals' instructional leadership development. These reports to a person confirmed the distinctions we made between higher and lower potential ILDs based on our earlier analysis using our conceptual framework.

- ***Dimension 2: Identifying more and less promising practice in central office support for ILD-principal partnership work.*** In this dimension, concerning activities of other central office administrators engaged in support of the ILD-principal partnerships we distinguished more and less promising supports based on our observations of other central office administrators' actions that (1) engaged the ILDs in challenging conversations about their own work with individual school principals and how to improve the quality of that work, or (2) helped ILDs maximize the time they spent on support for principals' instructional leadership. We triangulated our observations with ILDs' reports of the extent to which other central office administrators challenged them to improve the quality of their work with school principals or helped them maximize their time with school principals on principals' instructional leadership. We verified our assumptions about how ILDs were using their time with principal interviews about the frequency of their interactions with their ILDs and reviews of a random sample of ILDs' calendars reviewed as part of interviews three times over the course of the study period.

- ***Dimension 3: Identifying more and less promising activities by the rest of the central office to focus their work on the improvement of teaching and learning.*** With this set of findings we make claims about particular activities that seemed promising for focusing the work of the rest of the central office on teaching and learning improvement. We derived the claims in this subsection about what other central office administrators were doing based on multiple

interviews with central office administrators about the nature of their daily work, drawing conclusions only if we could corroborate self-reports with reports of three different respondents or at least three different data sources (e.g., an interview, documents, and observations). We considered those activities promising for focusing other central office units on teaching-and-learning support if: (1) central office administrators could provide an explicit rationale or explanation for why specific reorganization and reculturing activities mattered to teaching and learning improvement in schools, or (2) if they demonstrated that the reorganizing and reculturing activities had resulted in additional teaching and learning resources in schools (such as freeing up principals' time for instructional leadership).

- ***Dimension 4: Identifying stewardship practices that were likely to foster and sustain the central office transformation process.*** In this dimension we make various claims about what stewardship of the central office transformation process involved. In distinguishing what specific stewardship practices fostered the central office transformation effort, we again triangulated observations and self-reports and inductively narrowed down a set of activities that we and our respondents consistently identified as supportive of the development and implementation of the overall transformation process.

- ***Dimension 5: Identifying prevalent and important practices in the use of evidence throughout the central office.*** Our claims in Dimension 5 relate to the prevalence of particular forms of evidence use. We based our claims about what these evidence-use activities involved mainly from observations of central office meetings as well as documents corroborated by interviews. We claim that these activities are important to central office transformation based on: (1) the research on organizational learning in our conceptual framework that shows how the collection and use of information from experience can help organizations realize their goals, and (2) observations and interviews in each site that demonstrated how integral such evidence-use activities were to the implementation of the other dimensions of central office transformation.

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