

KNOWLEDGE IN BRIEF

Findings You Can Use from New Wallace Research

HOW DISTRICT CENTRAL OFFICES CAN HELP LEAD SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

For years, the central offices of large urban school systems have been the punching bag of policymakers who see “District Headquarters” as a bureaucratic obstacle to improving public education. Some critics have even called for dismantling the offices and outsourcing their work.

Now, after conducting one of the first and most comprehensive studies of central offices that are trying to remake themselves, researchers at the University of Washington are arguing that the district office can be turned into a crucial ally of education reform. What’s required is that offices shed their identity as overseers “of buses, budgets and buildings,”¹ and adopt the role of service centers for better teaching and learning.

“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 authors say in *Central Office Transformation for District-Wide Teaching and Learning Improvement*.²

So how can the central office meet the challenge? The research, which examined central office makeover efforts in New York City, Atlanta, and Oakland, California, found five changes with particular promise for creating central offices that focus squarely on supporting better education.

THE FIVE DIMENSIONS OF TRANSFORMATION

1. Working Hand-in-Hand With Principals on Improving Instruction

The districts under study all created a new post the report calls “instructional leadership director” (ILD), a central office administrator assigned “to focus 100 percent”³ on bolstering principals’ ability to strengthen classroom

ABOUT THE REPORT

Central Office Transformation for District-Wide Teaching and Learning Improvement, commissioned by The Wallace Foundation and published in 2010 by the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy at the University of Washington College of Education, was written by Meredith I. Honig, Michael A. Copland, Lydia Rainey, Juli Anna Lorton and Morena Newton, with the assistance of Elizabeth Matson, Liza Pappas and Bethany Rogers.

instruction. Part coach, part interference-runner, part networker and part goad, the most effective ILDs employed common techniques, the research found. Among other things, they tailored their work to individual principals’ needs and “modeled” good practices – such as showing principals how to help a teacher understand the connection between student test data and his or her pedagogy. The best ILDs also made good use of tools. In Atlanta, for example, a publication describing sound teaching practices boosted the ILDs’ ability to teach principals how to spot and critique faculty members’ pedagogical flaws.

2. Supporting the ILD

Central offices supported the ILDs in a number of ways, including by offering training on how to improve their work with principals. In retreats and twice-monthly meetings, New York City ILDs, for example, participated in activities about issues including how to win a principal’s trust in ILD feedback. The central offices also helped the ILDs maximize the amount of time they spent with principals; Atlanta’s “Blackout Days” – lengthy periods when the central office guaranteed freedom from district distraction – allowed principals and ILDs to concentrate on what one administrator called “the core business”⁴ of instructional improvement.

3. Reorganizing and Changing the Culture of All Other Central Office Units

District leaders restructured units ranging from facilities to human resources. Equally important, they changed

the mindset of staffers so they would replace their one-size-fits-all, regulatory style of administration with a case- and project- management approach. The idea was for central office employees to get to know individual schools well, help them solve problems and support their improvement efforts. The change in Atlanta’s human resource office illustrates how this could play out. There, staffers learned “every school’s HR issues, what type of teachers they are looking for, who’s left, who’s coming, who’s pregnant”⁵ – and responded accordingly.

4. Providing Stewardship

The efforts demanded constant cultivation – “stewardship” – which began with a “theory of action” describing how to proceed, a well-thought-out rationale and the flexibility for plans to be revised as circumstances warranted. Stewardship also meant that central office administrators had to communicate well enough so that principals, central office employees, private donors and other key players could understand the work, know why it mattered and then lend their support.

5. Gathering and Using Information to Guide the Effort

Districts used data – not just student test scores, but findings from sources as varied as principal surveys or conversations with ILDs – to continuously examine and upgrade their support for schools. In Oakland, survey and other information led to the development of a scorecard making clear each unit’s most important tasks and tracking progress toward them. One administrator compared the work to that of “a coach of a baseball team that’s using their stats all the time.”⁶

TRANSFORMATION: A DIFFICULT BUT PROMISING PATH

The researchers caution that transformation is tough. Reorganizing and changing the culture of central office units, for instance, may require reassigning large numbers of staffers or undergoing the pain of letting others go. Training employees in new ways to work and think about their jobs can be demanding, like trying to “teach a dog to meow,” in the words of one administrator.⁷ Difficult issues need to be addressed, such as how to make sure that the ideally close bond between ILD and principal is not jeopardized by district-required evaluations of principals’ work. Moreover, tight budgets, increased calls

REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISTRICT LEADERS LAUNCHING CENTRAL OFFICE TRANSFORMATION

- Make transformation a focal point of efforts to improve teaching and learning
- Develop a “theory of action” on how to proceed and plan to revise it as work unfolds
- Invest in the people throughout the district who will lead the work
- Make sure key players understand why the effort is important to improving education

for accountability and constant time pressure can keep administrators from critical transformation tasks, such as collecting and analyzing data. “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,” the researchers warn.⁸

Still, they call transformation “an exciting and promising new reform” that could lead to every staffer working toward a district in which teachers teach well and principals lead them in doing so. Yes, transformation is complex, the authors say, “but ultimately very much worth doing.”⁹

¹ Meredith I. Honig, Michael A. Copland et al., *Central Office Transformation for District-Wide Teaching and Learning Improvement*, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington, 2010, p. 120.

² Ibid, 117.

³ Ibid, vi.

⁴ Ibid, 27.

⁵ Ibid, 72.

⁶ Ibid, 111.

⁷ Ibid, 79.

⁸ Ibid, 121.

⁹ Ibid, 127.