

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 421 755

EA 029 145

AUTHOR Kuo, Victor  
TITLE District Office Support of School Restructuring: Case Study Results and Theoretical Implications.  
PUB DATE 1998-03-25  
NOTE 33p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Diego, CA, April 13-17, 1998).  
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; \*Change Agents; \*Change Strategies; Educational Change; Educational Theories; Elementary Secondary Education; \*School Restructuring; School Support  
IDENTIFIERS Accelerated Schools

ABSTRACT

This study by the Accelerated Schools Project at Stanford University explores the factors that were prominent in district office support of school reform. The paper details findings from case studies conducted between 1995 and 1997 of three district offices that have been supportive of Accelerated Schools and school restructuring. For the study, three subquestions were developed based upon the philosophy of the Accelerated Schools model and previous surveys: (1) What were the roles of school-site and district-office personnel with respect to school reform?; (2) What activities did the district office conduct to support school reform?; and (3) How can the decision-making processes between the district office and school sites be characterized? The three districts that were a part of this study were located in suburban settings. The findings, presented in light of recent advances within neoinstitutional theory, suggest that a theory of organizational maintenance and change may be applied to understanding how district offices may support the long-term success of Accelerated Schools as well as school restructuring in general. Furthermore, results show the importance of recognizing that such change depends on elements beyond the school site. Propositions for future research are suggested. (Contains 32 references and 4 appendices.) (RJM)

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**DISTRICT OFFICE SUPPORT OF SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING:  
CASE STUDY RESULTS AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

March 25, 1998

This paper was prepared by Victor Kuo for the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting in San Diego, California, April 13-17, 1998. Victor Kuo is a candidate for the doctor of philosophy degree in Educational Administration and Policy Analysis at the School of Education, Stanford University and research assistant at the National Center for the Accelerated Schools Project based at Stanford University. The author welcomes comments and suggestions which can be sent to: CERAS 109, School of Education, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305. The author can also be reached by e-mail at vkuo@leland.stanford.edu, phone (650) 725-6146, or fax at (650) 725-6140.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION:**

Since 1986, the Accelerated Schools Project at Stanford University has been engaged in researching and implementing school site restructuring. While the Accelerated Schools model has reached over 1,000 schools in over 40 states, participants in the Project have noted that the continued support of the district office is required for the long term growth and success of restructuring schools. In 1994, the National Center for the Accelerated Schools Project began to investigate the role of district offices in supporting and sustaining school site reform. The experiences of school site and district office personnel engaged in the model suggested that reforming schools needed decision-making flexibility, changed roles, and tangible support such as funding, time, and staffing (Segal, 1995; Driver, Hopfenberg and Thorp, 1995). Further analysis by National Center staff pointed to potential theories that might help explain sustaining reform (Driver, Throp, and Kuo 1996). This paper details findings from case studies conducted between 1995 and 1997 of three district offices that have been supportive of Accelerated Schools and school restructuring. The findings are then presented in light of recent advances within neo-institutional theory from sociology, and propositions for future research are suggested. Applications of the theory are extrapolated towards initiating change and sustaining district office practices that are supportive of the Accelerated Schools model and school restructuring efforts in general.

## **II. OBJECTIVES:**

The main objective of the study was to explore what factors were prominent in district office support of school reform. Specifically, the guiding question was "How can the district office support the Accelerated Schools model?" While the study was largely exploratory, three sub-questions were developed based upon the philosophy of the Accelerated Schools model and

previous surveys. The three sub-questions were: 1) What were the roles of school site and district office personnel with respect to school reform? 2) What activities did the district office conduct to support school reform? and 3) How can the decision-making processes between the district office and school sites be characterized? From these questions, findings were to be summarized and then matched to appropriate theories with potential for future research.

### **III. METHODS:**

The study employed exploratory case study methods (Yin, 1994). Interview transcripts and documents were the sources of data. Three school districts were selected based upon 1) participation of district office personnel in National Center for the Accelerated Schools Project training activities, 2) the presence of at least one Accelerated School within the district, and 3) general reputation for innovation. Eight to ten individuals from each district were interviewed by telephone for approximately 45 minutes to one hour. Interviewees included the district superintendent, assistant superintendents most closely responsible for personnel, instructional support, and/or alternative programs, board members, principals and teachers. Site visits also were conducted to allow interviewees to review case study drafts and to ensure reliability. Documents detailing district demographics, strategic planning initiatives, mission and value statements, training and professional development agendas, public relations, and staff hiring and evaluation procedures were also collected as data. Based upon procedures described by Yin (1994) interview responses and documentation were divided into descriptive categories from which major themes and conclusions were derived.

### **IV. FINDINGS:**

Firstly, key characteristics for the three districts include student populations of between 20,000 to 30,000 and schools numbering between 28 and 49. All three districts were located in

suburban settings. Districts were characterized by a range in percentage of non-white students (72%, 27% and 46%). Proportion of students classified as AFDC was large in one district but very small in the other two districts. Districts had Accelerated Schools launched in 1992, 1993, and 1994. Districts had between one and five Accelerated Schools (see Appendix A for summary).

Major themes emerging from the case studies were categorized under the three research questions. First, the roles that school site and district office personnel perceived themselves to hold with respect to school reform included: keeper or maintainer of mission/vision, promoter of risk-taking and entrepreneurial behavior, capacity-builder, and service provider (see Appendix B).

Second, major activities that the district offices conducted to support school restructuring include facilitating school level buy-in of restructuring; supporting the development of district and site level decision making (e.g. site-based-decision-making (SBM) or shared-decision-making (SDM) practices); providing professional development for site faculty and staff as well as district staff; revising evaluation procedures; creating organizational structures to support Accelerated Schools (see Appendix C).

Finally, with respect to characterizing decision-making processes, major emphasis was given to types of decision-making practices such as shared-decision making and site-based management. Emphasis was also given to delineating the criteria and boundaries of authority, clarifying conditions under which types of decisions are made and by whom, and formalizing and evaluating decision making processes (see Appendix D).

## **V. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK:**

The nature of the exploratory case study presumes that the goal of the study is to develop pertinent hypotheses and propositions for further inquiry (Yin, 1994) rather than to test

hypothesis or theory. Indeed, the intent of this study was to begin to identify what types of roles, activities, and decision-making processes are pertinent to the support of school restructuring. Following the identification of key factors, hypothesis can then be generated regarding district support of school restructuring. Furthermore, the generalizability of the study is limited to "analytic generalization" (Yin, 1994). In other words, the empirical findings are compared to previously developed theory rather than to a population (i.e. statistical generalization). Thus, the hypothesis generated from this study can be compared to existing theories allowing for the narrowing and identifying of specific theories worthy of further investigation.

## VI. ANALYSIS

The research findings suggest that a theory of organizational maintenance and change may be applied to understanding how district offices may support the long-term success of Accelerated Schools as well as school restructuring in general. In particular, from sociology, neo-institutional theory begins to account for many of the findings of this study. Neo-institutional theory attempts to explain the processes that shape the structure and function of social life in general and formal organizations in particular (Scott, 1995). Scott defines institutions as consisting of "cognitive, normative, and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behavior" (Scott, 1995). Cognitive structures include social roles and categories that guide meaningful action. Normative structures include values and beliefs. And regulative structures include formalized rules accompanied by the monitoring and sanctioning of activities.

Neo-institutional theory accounts for a number of findings: the importance of the socio-cultural context and how to characterize the context, the level of analysis, and the differentiation between material and non-material resources. Firstly, findings from the case studies point to the importance of recognizing that organizational change is dependent upon elements beyond the

school site; district offices, community groups, universities, and the business sector have played important roles in gaining support for organizational change within the three districts. In particular, schools undergoing restructuring as specified by the Accelerated Schools model, require some levels of support from the district office, community and business groups, and universities such as Stanford. Strategic planning activities that involve all "stakeholders" within the local community reflect the importance of recognizing the environment in which schools are embedded. Furthermore, new ideas for the roles of teachers and administrators are particularly important as they originate and are fostered from external sources such as Accelerated Schools mentoring and coaching relationships and from evolving professional norms developed with the district and other schools. Also, schools that attempt to maintain organizational change are necessarily influenced by the governance relationships that exist between the school and the district and even state level offices. These preliminary findings simply note the importance of recognizing how external factors influence school attempts to sustain reform.

Another important connection that neo-institutional theory presents is the identification of the level of analysis at which organizational change and maintenance can be examined. School level change can be examined at the individual social psychological level, the organizational level, the inter-organizational level and the societal or world systems level. While each level of analysis provides particular insights, the inter-organizational level is helpful in that the findings focus on the relationships between different types of organizations; the change in organizational form at the school level is seen in relation to the district office, other schools, universities, and community groups. A micro-level social psychological approach or a singular organizational level approach would miss the importance of relationships between the school and other key organizations such as the district, and a societal or worldview level would be perhaps too broad and difficult to

manage with respect to research. Ultimately, the neo-institutional perspective provides a way to explain findings from the central question of interest--"How do school districts support school restructuring?"

One final useful application that the neo-institutional perspective provides is the distinction between the material and non-material resources. Findings from the case studies point to not only concrete material resources needed for restructuring, such as dollars, time, and people, but also to abstract resources such as important ideas, values, and rules. Within the case studies, individuals stressed the importance of having clarified roles, new roles, changing mental conceptions of decision-making, and new values, missions, or norms. These non-material resources were perhaps even more important than the dollars and people allocated as material resources, because in many ways, the guiding ideas and values of the organization defined what material resources were to be allocated. Neo-institutional theories distinction between the material and non-material provides a useful conceptualization of what types of resources districts can provide to help schools restructure.

## **VII. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Findings from the exploratory case studies point to possible theories that explain organizational change as well as maintenance. This section is devoted to identifying and explicating one particular theory, neo-institutional theory from sociology, which generally accounts for the case study findings. As prescribed by Yin (1994), based upon patterns that emerge from exploratory case studies, existing theories may be considered and "matched" to the empirical findings allowing for further hypothesis development and future testing. The theory identifies the importance of recognizing how external factors help shape and bring stability to organizational forms. Consequently, the theory can be used to explain what factors are most

important for stabilizing and sustaining school restructuring.

The following sections develop four important areas of neo-institutional theory: A) acknowledging the importance of the environment in which an organization exists, B) identifying the appropriate level of analysis, C) distinguishing between types of environments (technical and institutional), and D) identifying three important elements within the institutional environment. Following the explanation of neo-institutional theory, I then propose ways in which the theory can be tested. I identify key variables to be studied (section E) and provide possible propositions for future research on school and district organizations (section F).

#### **A. Environments and organizations.**

The development of organizational studies within the field of sociology has pointed to the importance of understanding how the social environment effects organizational structure. Earlier conceptions of forces that shaped organizational structure emphasized internal elements such as technical efficiency and also informal relationships (see Scott 1998's characterization of rational and natural systems). Following World War II, social scientists began studying organizations from a systems perspective (e.g. Bertalanffy, 1956 and Buckley, 1967) and began to recognize the importance of how organizations engage their material and social environment and are shaped by it. Characterized as "open systems" perspectives (Scott, 1998), theories that related organizations with their surroundings were seen as important steps toward reconceptualizing how organizations are formed.

Important examples of open system theories include population ecology, resource dependency and institutional theory. Population ecology (Hannan and Freeman, 1977) draws upon Darwinian conceptions of how organizational forms interact with their environment. Groups, or populations, of similar organizations are subject to their environmental conditions and

may be selected for or eliminated based upon their congruence with environmental conditions. Resource dependency (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978) relies on similar arguments of population ecology but emphasizes the ability of organizations to change and adapt to their environment. In particular, organizational leaders and managers actively pursue strategies to acquire the necessary resources to negotiate the environment. Finally, institutional theory and in particular, neo-institutional theory (Scott, 1995) emphasizes how organizations are influenced by their environments but specifies that it is not only purely rational or efficiency-based forces that shape organizations but also socially constructed belief systems and normative rules (Scott, 1998). It is this last theory, neo-institutional theory, that provides the greatest insight into how educational organizations, particularly restructuring schools, are influenced by their environment.

A number of empirical studies explore how the environment influences organizational structure. Scott (Chapter 6 in Scott, 1995) provides a useful review of some key studies. One of the earliest works by Stinchcombe (1965) emphasized the importance of social conditions at the time of the founding of the organization on an organization's labor force structure. Meyer, Scott, and Strang (1987) studied how a complex environment, as represented by various federal funding sources, created complex administrative structures in schools and districts. Powell (1988) found similar patterns in a public television station, and D'Aunno, Sutton, and Price (1991) among mental health organizations. Rowan (1982) also examined how environments, as represented by the legislature, professional associations, and teacher-training institutions, influenced the adoption of administrative innovations; he concluded that "programs enjoying more consistent, balanced support from these agents were more likely to be adopted and to be retained..." Finally, Edelman (1992) examined how complex environments created by the civil rights law resulted in new organizational structures and how organizations responded to and interpreted those laws. In

short, these empirical studies reflect the important observation that environments shape organizational structures and processes, and also, that organizations respond to and interact with their environments.

**B. Environments: levels of analysis.**

Neo-institutional theorists proceed to specify how to conceptualize "environment." An initial step in conceptualizing environment is to identify various possible levels of analysis. Scott (1995) identifies at least six levels of analysis for the environment. From the broadest to the more narrow, environments can be considered at the world-system, societal, organizational field, organizational population, organization, and organizational subsystem levels. The different levels are useful for different purposes; for example, one may select a particular level of analysis depending upon the investigator's interest in scope, micro or macro phenomena, or a focal organization (for a full discussion, see Chapter 3, Scott, 1995 and Chapter 6, Scott, 1998). For the purposes of this paper, a useful level of analysis is the organizational field as proposed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). An organizational field refers to:

those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and produce consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services and products.

The organizational field is a useful one, because the central research question of interest is how an organizational form, a restructuring school, is influenced by other similar as well as dissimilar entities within the field of K-12 education. K-12 education is a "recognized area of institutional life" where schools, district offices, state agencies, community groups, parent groups, and business groups are identifiable entities that interact. Furthermore, initial findings from the case studies presented at the beginning of this paper refer to how districts offices must mediate

between schools, community groups as well as state and federal agencies. Identifying the organizational field thus provides an initial step towards conceptualizing the environment.

**C. Environments: technical and institutional.**

A second important step in specifying the environment is to distinguish between the "technical" and "institutional" environment. The technical environment encompasses the "more materialist, resource-based features," and the institutional environment encompass the "more symbolic, cultural factors affecting organizations" (Scott, 1998). Historically, organizational research began with examining the technical environment. As organizations were considered production systems, focus was given to material, resource, and energy inputs being transformed into outputs or products (Scott, 1998). In particular, technical resources were considered in terms of "stocks of resources" where organizations were dependent upon material resources, and "sources of information" where organizations faced uncertainty with respect to knowing how best to arrange work efficiently (Aldrich and Mindlin, 1978). The technical environment is a useful distinction with respect to understanding how districts can be supportive of school reform, as there are certainly material and informational resources necessary for the proper functioning of reform models. For example, financial and human resources such as money needed to purchase technical assistance services, consultants, and instructional supplies and adequate knowledge of how best to arrange school time, meetings with parents and community members, and classroom instructional techniques are all examples of elements of the technical environment.

Institutional environments refer to cultural and symbolic factors such as political, social, and legal frameworks. Historically, the various disciplines such as political science, sociology, and economics, have developed conceptions of institutional environments. Scott's recent conception of institutional environment integrates these various disciplinary strands of institutional

environment into what is called "neo-institutional theory" (Scott, 1995). Scott provides an inclusive definition:

institutions consist of cognitive, normative, and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behavior.

Scott identifies three "pillars" that are important elements of institutional environments: cognitive, normative and regulative. These three elements fundamentally guide social behavior. Social behavior is regularized, repeated or patterned by these three elements thus providing stability for social life. Furthermore, social behavior is given meaning by these structures, so that individuals in society can understand, interpret, and place value on types of activities (Berger and Luckman, 1967). The theory provides a framework for explaining how organizational forms are made stable and consequently identifies elements for change within the socio-cultural environment.

The value in specifying the institutional environment in this way is in recognizing that the environment consists of abstracted forces beyond the technical resources previously conceptualized. The cognitive, normative, and regulative structures refer to abstract cultural rules that individuals in society agree upon and that influence social behavior perhaps just as importantly, if not moreso, than the physical resources needed in organizational activities. Essentially, this recognition of abstracted rules or patterns requires a shift in understanding of the nature of social reality. Berger and Luckman (1967) argue that social life is only possible because and to the extent that individuals in interaction create common frameworks and understanding that support collective action; social reality is socially constructed. So for example, the fact that children attend school, do homework, and have recess depends on the fact that individuals within

society collectively understand what "school" is, and that the notion of "school" has certain rules and patterns that guide what individuals do in a school. The fact that society has the concept of school requires that individuals in society collectively agree on what it is, place value on it, and begin to ascribe formal as well as informal rules to it. Thus, conceptualizing the environment in this way, and specifying it as the institutional environment, provides a beginning towards understanding how the social environment affects how and why organizations are formed the way they are.

**D. Institutional environments: three elements**

The previous distinction of environments requires further specification of the three elements: cognitive, normative, and regulative. The cognitive pillar emerges from developments in social psychology and emphasizes the importance of categories and filing systems for sorting information (Jones and Davis, 1965). Individuals are seen as actively processing information and creating categories in which they locate themselves. Individuals' identities are viewed as "shared social meanings that persons attribute to themselves in a role" (Burke and Reitzes, 1991). The cognitive pillar is important for providing stability in society and for guiding social behavior as individuals rely on cognitive categories to understand who they are and what they do. The cognitive element is particularly important within organizations as different individuals develop different roles and consequently conduct their behavior to fit those roles. The power of the cognitive element as an institutional element is that individuals adopt these roles consciously or subconsciously and begin to assume the roles as "taken for granted" (Scott, 1995). In other words, individuals may eventually assume that particular categories and ways of classification are the ways in which things have always been done, preempting alternative ways of categorizing and behaving. Thus, cognitive structures have a powerful influence over how individuals understand

their social environment and consequently behave.

The normative pillar has its origins in early works of organizational studies and sociological versions of institutional theory. Selznick's (1957) discussion of leadership in administration draws attention to the importance of values within organizations and how an organization becomes an institution by taking on values and ascribing importance to ways of acting and believing. The normative pillar as it has developed emphasizes moreso values and norms within organizations moreso than technical efficiency (see Meyer and Rowan's 1977 foundational piece on rationalized myths). Values are "conceptions of the preferred or the desirable together with the construction of standards to which existing structures or behavior can be compared and assessed" (Scott, 1995). In a sense, normative elements are cognitive elements imbued with values or some evaluation. So individuals behave in particular roles, not only because they understand that that role is defined in a particular way, but also because that role has attached to it social expectations, obligations, and parameters of appropriateness. The importance of the normative pillar emphasizes that individuals behave not merely out of self-interest in an economic sense, but also out of what is socially accepted and valued.

The third and final pillar is the regulative pillar. The regulative pillar has historically been emphasized by political scientists and economists (e.g. Skocpol, 1985 and Williamson, 1975). The regulative pillar emphasizes the importance of explicit rules. Rules guide social behavior because they are formalized in laws; they are accompanied by monitoring procedures, sanctions, rewards and punishments. Social stability is ensured by the operation of formal rules and laws. Costs and penalties limit individuals from pursuing self-interested goals at the expense of social stability. The regulative pillar is considered perhaps the most conventional and obvious perspective of conceptualizing institutions (Scott, 1995).

The three elements, cognitive, normative, and regulative pillars of neo-institutional theory specify the institutional environment. This specification is useful for understanding how school districts can support school reform, because the elements account for a variety of findings from the exploratory case studies. Specifically, the cognitive pillar reflects individuals' responses to how they viewed their roles with respect to school reform. Superintendents, assistant superintendents, district staff members, and principals described changing conceptions of their individual roles as well as the corporate role of the district office in relation to individual schools. The normative pillar is reflected also in how individuals specified their roles, but also in how they spoke about how those roles matched district's expectations and in particular, recently created mission statements with explicitly developed values. The regulative pillar is also reflected in how district offices have revised their governance structures to accommodate school level restructuring; school based budgeting, shared decision making, and ambiguities in changing school board/district, district/school, and school/teacher decision-making relationships.

**E. Institutional environments: operationalizing variables**

Neo-institutional theory and its specific conceptualizations of institutional environments (with cognitive, normative, and regulative elements) can be seen as a useful way of investigating how organizational forms, such as restructuring schools, are influenced by their environment-- both technical and institutional. I now suggest ways in which the theory can be operationalized into variables for future research to address the question of "*what is the effect of the institutional environment on the organizational form of restructuring schools?*" Attention is given only to operationalizing the institutional environment.

The technical environment can be considered in real material terms; variables would include dollars amounts, time available, human resources, instructional supplies etc. Particular

technical elements include many of the activities or resources listed in Appendix B. Variables such as funding and personnel availability would be included in the future research as control variables.

The following variables, as operationalized institutional elements, can be studied using a combination of methods--both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Specifically, with respect to the cognitive elements, the social constructionist nature of the theory calls for ethnographic methods in which the "emic" perspective of individuals is elicited by the researcher from the subject. Contextualized interviews involving "thick" and "holistic" description (see Fetterman, 1994) would be most appropriate for describing professional roles as cognitive elements. From these interviews, qualitative conclusions or pattern-matching can be drawn; but also, qualitative analysis using computer programs can be used to calculate the frequency of key words and phrases.

With respect to the normative elements, recent advances in social network analysis would permit the measuring of the pervasiveness of normative structures. Baum and Oliver's (1992) study of the institutionalization of day-care centers exemplified how normative "legitimacy" can be operationalized as network relational ties. Baum and Oliver's methodology can be further developed using quantitative social network analysis (see Wasserman and Faust, 1994) in which normative "forces" are quantified as "advice ties" among actors supportive of school restructuring. The increasing number of actors identified within the social network of advice ties, and the increasing density of networks (existing ties relative to the total number of possible ties) among those actors would permit measurement of "normative" forces among key school district actors.

Finally with respect to regulative elements, regulative elements can be operationalized as

the formal rules and regulations that specify the decision-making relationship between districts and schools. In particular, rules that allow discretion by the school site to govern staffing and budgeting decisions can be identified as key variables that are present or absent. Regulative elements can be measured using interview questionnaires and document analysis.

*Independent variables:*

1) The cognitive element can be operationalized as the professional roles of key district office members with respect to school restructuring. Specifically, individuals can be asked to describe what they perceive to be their key responsibilities with respect to school reform. Interviews can be transcribed and analyzed using qualitative computer analysis programs (e.g. Q.S.R. Nudist) and the frequency of key words and phrases consistent with those described in Appendix A can be calculated.

2) The normative element can be operationalized as the density of social networks among key district office members with respect to supporting school restructuring. Specifically, individuals involved with supporting school restructuring would be identified by nomination or "snowball technique" (Wasserman and Faust, 1994) and then asked to identify from a list of nominated individuals who they ask for advice regarding supporting school restructuring. From this list of identified individuals, network analysis techniques can be used to calculate to structural density (ties present divided by total possible ties) of the social network, providing a measure of the social homogeneity of individuals within the network.

3) The regulative element can be operationalized as the presence or absence of decision-making

rules of the district that are supportive of school restructuring. Specifically, formal rules and regulations specifying staffing and budgeting flexibility can be identified. Individuals can be asked about the rules governing decision-making over staffing and budgeting, and formal documents specifying these regulatory relationships can be reviewed.

\* *Dimensions*: the independent variables can be measured across two key dimensions at the organizational field level of analysis. The two dimensions include: space and time (Scott, et al. 1997). Professional roles and decision-making relationships can be described within a limited space as in a particular school district, state, or region. Variables can be described within a particular time frame such as the beginning of the implementation of the reform program to the present.

*Dependent variable*:

The dependent variable is the Accelerated Schools model as an organizational form. The presence of the model can be examined using specific measurement tools created by the National Center for the Accelerated Schools Project (NCASP). Specifically, the NCASP has created an "Internal Toolkit" that contains rubrics to measure the extent to which key elements of the model are present (the governance process, Accelerated Schools philosophy, and powerful learning components).

**F. Propositions for future research**

Based upon the variables identified above, and their operationalizations, I identify propositions for future study. The following propositions identify the independent variables and their theorized effect upon the dependent variable. The following propositions are intended to

test the effect of the institutional environment upon the organizational form of restructuring schools across two dimensions: time and space. Findings based upon this research program would provide systematic generalizability of the effects of institutional environments on organizational forms.

**Proposition #1a:**

The greater the extent that professional roles of district office members support school reform over time, the greater the extent that the Accelerated Schools model will be present over time.

**Proposition #1b:**

The greater the extent that professional roles of district office members support school reform across space, the greater the extent that the Accelerated Schools model will be present across space.

**Proposition #2a:**

The greater the network density among district office members who support school reform over time, the greater the extent that the Accelerated Schools model will be present over time.

**Proposition #2b:**

The greater the network density among district office members support school reform across space, the greater the extent that the Accelerated Schools model will be present across space.

**Proposition #3a:**

The greater the extent that decision-making rules are supportive of school reform over time, the greater the extent that the Accelerated Schools model will be present over time.

**Proposition #3b:**

The greater the extent that decision-making rules are supportive of school reform across space, the greater the extent that the Accelerated Schools model will be present across space.

## **VIII. CONCLUSION AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE**

The purpose of this paper is to begin to identify important factors that affect the sustaining of school restructuring. This paper presented empirical research from case studies conducted of three school districts that have supported the Accelerated Schools Project model of school reform. The exploratory case studies attempted to answer the key questions 1) What were the roles of school site and district office personnel with respect to school reform? 2) What activities

did the district office conduct to support school reform? and 3) How can the decision-making processes between the district office and school sites be characterized. Initial findings were presented and considered from a neo-institutional theoretical lens. Propositions for future research were presented based upon theoretical conceptualizations of institutional environments' effects on organizational forms.

If indeed the institutional environment can be shown to be causally related to the long term presence of organizational forms, neo-institutional theory will have provided a useful means towards conceptualizing how innovative school reform models, such as the Accelerated Schools, can be sustained over time. The key variables as identified by the theory (the cognitive, normative, and regulative elements) will be important targets to consider in planning and implementing reform activities. Furthermore, the theory points to how these particular elements provide stability and maintenance over time, and why change is so difficult. Historically, institutional theory has presumed a perspective of stability and inertia; indeed, the power of institutions is in their inability to resist change. Reformers must be aware of as well as cautious of the fact that existing institutions, particularly standard practices within school districts, are already deeply embedded, and that change will require making explicit existing institutions, challenging them, replacing those institutions with new ones, and then maintaining new institutions through time and space.

Recent activities within neo-institutional theory have begun to recognize the role of change in institutions (e.g. Scott, 1995; Jepperson, 1991; Oliver, 1991). The process of changing existing institutions into new institutions has been termed "reinstitutionalization" (Jepperson, 1991). Reinstitutionalization is a type of institutional change that represents the exit from one institutional form and entry into another institutional form. The new institutional form is

organized around new principles or, as Scott has characterized institutions, new cognitive, normative, and regulative structures. Jepperson identifies levels at which reinstitutionalization can occur. One of the most important levels at which reinstitutionalization takes place is at the institutional environment level where existing institutional environments come into conflict with other institutional environments. For example contradicting environmental pressures might include differing understanding, expectations, and rules for school systems such as decentralization versus market forces represented by school choice versus differing models of reform. Contradicting forces block the continued maintenance and reproduction of existing institutions and provide the opportunity for new institutions to emerge (Jepperson, 1991).

Another important caveat to institutional change worth considering is the scope at which change is possible. Jepperson (1991) also notes that institutionalization should be considered as a relative term. The property of being an "institution" always begs the question of "In relation to what?" An initial response to this concern should address the matter of time and space. School reformers may wish to first consider the pervasiveness of an "institution" in relation to some prior point in time. Stronger regulative, normative, cognitive structures in quality and quantity can be compared over time. Additionally, "institutions" should be evaluated in relation to space. Institutions are relative to the geographic regions that they pervade; attention should be given to how reforms have spread beyond schools, school districts, states, regions, and among nations. Thus when considering how school districts can support school restructuring, consideration must be given to the expected pervasiveness of change.

Acknowledging the need for further research and conceptualizations of institutional change, the preceding discussion based on neo-institutional theory suggests that organizational leaders focus on cognitive, normative, and regulative structures within their organizations as well

as in their organizational field. Following the introduction of a new organizational form, or even in attempts to maintain the current organizational form, organizational leaders should be aware or be made aware of their interests in the organizational form and then work to develop the cognitive, normative, and regulative structures that support that form. Furthermore, they should also be aware of how these same structures relate to the institutional environment--specifically the organizational field. Organizational leaders need to manage "in" as well as "out."

These preliminary findings in our research suggest ways in which school districts can be supportive of school restructuring. It is our hope that the professionals, educators, and committed individuals in the public school system will continue to pursue the goals of increased student learning and school improvement for all children, particularly students in at-risk situations. To this end, it is our hope that this research will help advance our understanding of how district leaders can help support the Accelerated Schools Project specifically and school restructuring in general.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to Prof. W. R. Scott of Stanford University for insightful comments on various drafts leading to this document and my fellow student members of Prof. Scott's classes on organizational sociology and institutional analysis. Appreciation also goes to Cyrus Driver of the National Center for the Accelerated Schools Project for lively conversation and useful suggestions. I must also acknowledge the generous cooperation and patience of all interviewees involved in conducting this research; their continued efforts and accomplishments in improving the education of at-risk children is ultimately the crux of the matter. Appreciation is also extended to Prof. H. M. Levin, director of the Accelerated Schools Project and Prof. Erica O'Neal of the Accelerated Schools Project. Support for this research has been provided by the Dana Foundation.

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## APPENDIX A: CASE STUDY DISTRICT PROFILES

District Characteristics:	A	B	C
<b>Size</b>			
Students:	20,000	30,000	28,492
District Office Staff:	77	34	
<b>Number of Schools</b>			
Elementary:	33	19	28
Middle:	0	5	7
Senior high:	0	4	4
Type:	suburban	suburban	suburban
<b>Racial/Ethnic Composition</b>			
White:	28%	73%	54.1%
Hispanic/Latino/a:	54	7.4	15.7
African American:	5.7	<1%	24.1
Asian American:	3.2	8	5.1
Filipino:	6.8	8	<1
Pacific Islander:	<1	<1	<1
Native American:	<1	<1	1
<b>Social Economic Status</b>			
AFDC:	46%	3%	3%
<b>Accelerated Schools</b>			
Year First ASP School Launched:	1993	1994	1992
Number of Accelerated Schools:	3	1	5

## APPENDIX B: SUMMARY OF ROLES OF DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS

The following excerpts are descriptions of how various district administrators perceived their roles with respect to school reform. Roles are listed for superintendents, assistant superintendents, and principals who participated in case study interviews. For full contextualization of quotes and description of roles of district administrators, see case studies of districts (Kuo, 1996a; Kuo, 1996b, and Kuo, 1997).

### Superintendents:

- "maintainer of the mission and values of the organization"
- adjuster of the mission and values of the organization
- "keeper of the flame"
- maintainer of the focus and purpose of the district
- "person that has to set the pointers and direction"
  
- "supportive and encouraging of risk-taking"
- "belief in the capacity of people when given the appropriate support to make a decision on behalf of the children"
- "My role is to model and demonstrate some of the attributes--to cause discomfort, to cause incongruencies...It is about instilling the core value of what we do with our children."
- "It's about shifting responsibility." "There's an incongruity, anxiety, and frustration, that says, we can't get an answer. Where are the new rules? Where's the new script?..."
  
- "continuing to raise the bar in the Olympic tradition so that our people can strive towards greater heights"

### Assistant Superintendents:

- "I am a support for schools, so whenever they call me in to help, I go in to help"
- "[The district] fosters a culture where the support services are supportive of the classroom...I demand of my staff that we see ourselves as an arm of that experience"
- "support, service, and leadership"
- "to supply the support that is necessary to help the schools and teachers do their job"
- "I've seen a move from mandate and compliance towards service and support."
  
- Director of Leadership: newly created, formal role, dedicated to providing staff development for administrators
- supporting overall goals of the strategic plan
- integrating district specialists into vision of district
- bringing groups together and working collaboratively
- "maintaining vision of the district and reducing conflicting goals"
- "to help them [Accelerated Schools] stay focused on their vision"

### Principals:

- "keeping things in front of the staff"
- "to think through what's important and to move to that vision"

- ""being a coordinator of instructional leaders"
- "to support and challenge teachers...to move toward our vision of Achieving Academic Excellence"
- "leader rather than manager...As a leader, the principal helps keep the vision of the building"
- "helps develop leadership skills, the strengths, and talents of others"
- "more of a rebel"
- "we've used the label of 'instructional leader' but no one knew what they meant. We're now learning what that means."
- "It's a role shift to change school culture"
- "develop leadership skills"
- "make sure they [staff] have lots of opportunities for professional growth"
- " to help them look at the big picture"
- "I perceive my role as a change agent who needs to build capacity..."
- ""My role involves providing a structure for the staff to learn how to inquire and research about best practices.."

## APPENDIX C: SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES IN SUPPORT OF SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING

### Buy-In

- recognizing differing levels of readiness
- not requiring, but encouraging, schools to participate in restructuring
  
- Strategic planning
- developing Mission Statement
- developing "Learner Outcomes"
- identifying "Core Values"
- identifying "Essential Questions"
- identifying priority areas
- developing action plans
- identifying appropriate individuals, or groups, to address priority areas

### Decision Making

- Site Based Decision Making
- Site Based Management
- Shared Decision Making
- allowing site control over principal selection
- allowing site control over teacher hiring
- allowing site control over instructional and material supplies
- specifying types of decision making with respect to individuals affected, scope, time
- identifying and including all stakeholders
- piloting of decision-making models
- Selection of Faculty and Staff
- developing interview protocols that reflect needs of specific restructuring school needs
- discussing with candidates restructuring activities at school
- discussing with candidates expectations with respect to supporting restructuring
- including school site faculty and staff in hiring process
- if teachers are removed/leave, agreeing that the district will involve the school community in selecting new teachers.
- allowing the principal to remain with restructuring school for 5 years
- if principal is removed/leaves, agreeing that district will involve school community in selecting new principal

### Professional Development for Site Faculty and Staff

- providing literature on restructuring schools to new staff members
- providing flexible in-service opportunities for staff members to become familiar with restructuring activities
- principals, teachers, parents, and community members participating in training in Powerful Learning
- principals, teachers, parents, and community members participating in training in Inquiry
- providing discretion for restructuring schools to determine use of staff development days
- providing opportunities for teachers and principals to participate in district, regional, and

national Accelerated Schools networking conferences.

#### Professional Development for District Staff

- understanding and adapting to change
- understanding new hiring practices consistent with district mission
- understanding new evaluation practices consistent with district mission
- identifying "quality leadership" characteristics
- encouraging service and support of client orientation
- encouraging modeling of risk-taking behaviors by superintendent

#### Evaluation of Faculty and Staff

- revising evaluation procedures to reflect values supportive of restructuring
- formalizing revised evaluation procedures in official district procedures

#### Organizational Structures

- developing a district-wide council or committee composed of school leaders involved in school restructuring
- developing a district position (e.g. an assistant superintendent) dedicated to coaching restructuring schools: buy-in, on-site visitations, powerful learning, inquiry
- mediating between various levels of organization

#### Other

- avoiding overuse of reform language/jargon
- addressing transportation concerns

## **APPENDIX D: SUMMARY OF DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES**

The following is an abbreviated description of some of the major decision-making processes described in the case studies. Different districts articulated different types of decision making processes, but all focused on decentralizing authority to other district level administrators as well as school site administrators. The summary reflects changing conceptions of district-school site governance relationships that are progressively consistent with the needs of restructuring schools, such as Accelerated Schools. For a full, contextualized description, see case studies of the districts involved (Kuo, 1996a; Kuo, 1996b; Kuo, 1997).

### **Shared Decision Making**

- "a joint planning, problem solving and decision-making process that includes members of the school community/stakeholders who seek to enhance the education of students and the quality of learning, teaching and the working environment. The school community/stakeholders are involved in the Decision-Making process and are responsible for the implementation of those decisions. The outcomes of this Decision-Making process are to increase student achievement, school community/stakeholder satisfaction and make efficient use of resources."
- recognizing that each site is not independent, but rather an entity in relationship to the whole district.
- assuming that school community/stakeholders can make responsible educational decisions
- district office setting boundaries and parameters within which decision must fall
- identifying scope of decision with respect to those affected, time required, and anticipated outcome

### **Site-Based Management**

- emphasizing staffing and budgeting autonomy
- controlling quantity and types of staff or faculty hired
- developing a leadership team (principal, grade level leader)
- adhering to plans developed by school site committee
- adhering to boundaries of core values established by district (specifically student learning)

### **Delegated Governance**

- leaving principals or division directors alone so long outcomes are achieved
- trusting key leaders
- distinguishing types of decisions that require varying levels of participation and consensus
  - district wide issues decided by superintendent and cabinet
  - school site needs decided by principals, division directors, and sometimes superintendent
  - reducing levels of approval required for action

### **Other Issues**

- negotiating with teacher's unions regarding levels of control by union
- clarifying ambiguities over range of decisions
- providing differing guidelines based upon individuals involved "situational leadership"
- recognizing the chaotic and unpredictable nature of district operations
- recognizing need by superintendent to sometimes override decisions based upon conditions



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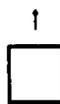
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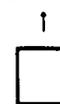
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