



CENTER FOR
URBAN
EDUCATION
LEADERSHIP

COLLEGE
OF EDUCATION



Transforming Central Office Practices
for Equity, Coherence, and
Continuous Improvement: Chicago
Public Schools under the Leadership
of Dr. Janice K. Jackson

Samuel P. Whalen PhD

December 15, 2020

Executive Summary

Introduction

This case study examines the transformational agenda of Dr. Janice K. Jackson, CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, along with the central office leadership team she assembled over a five-year period beginning in fall 2015. In several respects Dr. Jackson's approach to district leadership is representative of a national cadre of urban leaders who are arguably the best prepared generation of educators to ascend to district leadership in the nation's history. These leaders are beneficiaries both of an expanded knowledge base around instructional leadership and learning-focused management, as well as a range of leadership supports not available to prior generations of system leaders. How these new leaders learn to apply this knowledge and experience in tackling challenges of urban education at scale, particularly those bearing on educational excellence with equity, is a question of considerable importance for the nation's districts and schools.

In July 2015 Dr. Jackson was tapped by then-Mayor Rahm Emanuel to become Chief Education Officer (CEdO) in partnership with CEO Forrest Claypool, a veteran public "turn-around" administrator. Their appointments came on the heels of three tumultuous years of discord over school closings, labor unrest, fiscal turbulence, leadership scandal, and persistent inequities in student outcomes and school conditions by income and zip code. Dr. Jackson was given wide latitude as CEdO - within some severe fiscal constraints - to advance a renewed vision for CPS and back up that vision with a re-culturing and re-tooling of the academic side of central office. Rising to the CEO role in December 2017, and with less budgetary pressure, she expanded the same equity-focused agenda of customer service and strategic planning to the "operations" side of CPS central office, and began leveraging technology and professional learning to align specific school needs to central office resources more powerfully. In doing so, she and her team aspired to create a human and technical infrastructure for ambitious district-wide innovations that would be grounded in robust processes of continuous improvement, prove adaptable across Chicago's diverse communities, and be sustainable where the "biggest bets" of prior administrations had often faltered. The case addresses six primary research questions:

RQ1. What were the origins and progenitors of the approach to institutional revitalization that the CEO and her team designed and enacted from mid-2015 through the start of 2020? How did she combine varied influences into a coherent change management strategy?

RQ2. What structures, routines, and tools (or SRT) were developed to enact the CEO's vision for continuous improvement and district transformation, and in particular, the enactment of continuous improvement processes? How were these SRT adapted and improved over time?

RQ3. What contextual factors, internal and external to CPS, were affordances for the realization of the CEO's vision and strategic initiatives? What contextual factors challenged, constrained, or obstructed these initiatives?

RQ4. How and how well did central office improvement strategies align to a vision, strategies, and toolsets for continuous improvement at the Network and school levels? How far did alignment progress, and what challenges to such alignment emerged?

RQ5. Over time, what were the most prominent successes and impacts of the CEO's institutional revitalization program on the culture and capacity of the district? Did these advances translate to measurable gains in key metrics of professional capacity and student success?

RQ6. What leadership lessons did the CEO draw from her efforts to shift institutional culture and capacity toward continuous improvement practices?

Case Methodology

We employed a qualitative research design combining individual and group interviews, artifact analysis, and observation of central office meetings and events. We conducted seven interviews with Dr. Jackson between April 2017 and June 2020 - three in her capacity as CEo, and four after December 2017 in her capacity as CEO, totaling about 9.5 interview hours. The remaining 37 interviews with 40 central office key informants were collected between September 2019 and April 2020, yielding about 65 interview hours. Most interviews were with central office informants at the department head level or higher, with a secondary representation from staff at the project manager and analyst level. We logged over 20 hours of observations of central office meetings and public district events, and assembled a deep library of public and central office work artifacts. The final case text includes access to and analysis of 40 exhibits bearing on enhancements to district capacity. We benefited from the cooperation of CEO office staff who opened meeting venues and shared documents and artifacts with minimal restrictions. The study's conclusions remain exclusively the responsibility of the author.

Conceptual Foundations

Our case analysis draws extensively from the literatures of institutional and instructional coherence, particularly as they bear on understanding organizational learning and adaptive leadership. Three broad perspectives from these sources are particularly consequential. The first involves viewing *coherence as a dynamic process and practice*. Honig & Hatch (2004) view coherence as a dynamic and continuous process of sense-making, strategic adjustment, optimizing competing factors, and harmonizing competing demands. In keeping with the actual flux of demands from sources internal and external to school districts, effective large district CEOs “craft coherence” proactively through combinations of strategies such as coordinating the interests and actions of multiple stakeholders (i.e. bridging), protecting key processes and actors from external interference (i.e. buffering), and “brokering” key relationships and resource exchanges to further organizational goals (see also Durand et al., 2016; Asada et al., 2020). In turn, district leaders who evidence a process and “craft” orientation toward coherence place a premium on building the subjective capacity of the organization for learning, improvement, and identification of emerging opportunities (also Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

Second, coherence-making is eminently a process of learning, and in particular, learning to improve (Hubbard, Mehan & Stein, 2006; Bryk et al., 2015). In districts aspiring to achieve the goals of the Common Core State Standards, collective learning is imperative, since experience with inquiry-oriented pedagogies implicated in teaching for understanding is at best scattered and not wide-spread (Hiebert, Gallimore & Stigler, 2002; Panero & Talbert, 2013). At all district levels, the work of leading for learning involves a challenging mix of modeling a “learner’s stance” in interactions with colleagues, facilitating the selection of inquiry tools and on-going improvement of data-informed inquiry cycles, and deepening and distributing staff leadership and expertise in learning processes (Supowitz, 2006; Knapp et al., 2014). A ubiquitous tension for district leaders involves the introduction of structures and routines of strategic inquiry, on the one hand, and the cultivation of a deeper culture of inquiry and critical analysis - both hallmarks of a “learning organization” (Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 2012; Glennan & Resnick, 2004).

Third, the crafting of organizational coherence is closely linked to practices of adaptive leadership, broadly defined as the capacity to create conditions for organizational members to flexibly apply routine or innovative solutions to novel problem spaces – that is, to exercise adaptive expertise (NRC, 2000, 2005). According to Durand and colleagues (2016) “Adaptive leadership is necessary when novelty, complexity, and uncertainty are apparent - in short, when there are no easy answers and leaders must engage in justifiable experimentation, often over an extended period of time” (p. 51). McDaniels (2007) has identified three signature features of adaptive leadership as both a mindset and organizing focus of collective practice within complex, loosely coupled systems like school districts: shared diagnostic “*sense-making*” of ambiguous information sources, yielding sufficient clarity to sustain action; “*learning*”

understood as iterative, cyclic, and experimental inquiry processes designed to progressively clarify options for collective action; and “*improvisation*,” involving the capacity of leaders individually and collectively to respond with innovation and resilience to circumstances of surprise and uncertainty. The case examines evidence that features of adaptivity bearing on coherence-making help illuminate Dr. Jackson’s emerging agenda to shift traditional accountability structures in the direction of better aligned and strategically thoughtful continuous improvement practices, beginning with central office work-ways.

Case Overview

The body of the case study provides a detailed account of the iterative development of a culture and practice of organizational learning and continuous improvement in CPS central office through three distinct phases. The first phase involved Dr. Jackson’s transition to the CEo role during a period of budgetary contraction and staff reorganization, from summer 2015 to spring 2016. The primary adaptive challenge during this phase was to initiate a transformational agenda for central office support of school improvement, within stressful and constrained conditions that otherwise might favor transactional institutional responses - compliance, self-interest, and risk-aversion.

Dr. Jackson’s response to this complex and fluid entry situation exhibited several features of adaptivity that would become signature features of her district leadership in ensuing years. In building her core team around a *proactive entry plan*, the CEo began to model the level of strategic thinking and iterative flexibility that she intended to socialize and cultivate across the central office. The plan set out a weekly cadence for addressing entry objectives, but made clear that the protocol must function as a living document for collective revision and improvement. She also made early sense of the power dynamics between herself, the CEO, and the Mayor, and proved adept at combining transactional and transformational leadership strategies in order to secure their support for her control over the district’s academic agenda. She frankly engaged central office leaders, Network Chiefs, and principals about the pragmatic need to, in Heifetz’s terms, “distinguish what’s precious and essential from what’s expendable...” within their units (2006, p. 80). To do this she articulated “Three Big Questions” to guide central office chiefs and department directors in framing strategic plans, asking: How would their plans become accessible to principals? To teachers? And how would they impact the success of students? These planning criteria gave concrete expression to her instructional and moral vision - to shift central office mindsets toward service, and more powerfully align to supporting the instructional core in the best interests of CPS children. As a consequence, the new CEo emerged from the first months of “right-sizing” in central office with an enhanced reputation for transparency, principled pragmatism, and political acumen, winning the provisional trust and confidence of central office leaders in her commitment to an ambitious reform agenda.

In the second phase of development, CEo Jackson and her team learned to leverage features of the fiscal emergency facing CPS as well as existing assets and a recent legacy of performance management practices to initiate an agenda for capacity development bearing on instructional coherence. The situation called for practices supporting inspiration, iterative and disciplined learning with robust feedback to effort, and nimble improvisation to re-boot public support and build a climate of reciprocal accountability for learning to improve. In response, she and her team developed a theory of action based in the literatures of school- and district-level instructional leadership, filtered through her experiences as a high school principal. Its primary elements were: to articulate a compelling normative vision for district success based on stakeholder consensus; to re-align daily professional practices and partnerships to strengthen the instructional core; to address the professional learning demands entailed in changing mindsets and practices; and to organize a leadership cadre with the skills necessary to build staff capacity for cycles of learning and implementation (Honig, 2008; Knapp et al., 2014; Leithwood & Azah, 2017). The CEo team also introduced the idea of the “Collaboration Continuum” (CC) as a particularly adaptable framework for distinguishing different levels of cooperative action within complex organizations, and

situating PM within a collective understanding of organizational improvement (Zorich, Waibel & Erway 2008). The CC defines five levels of inter-departmental interaction and information transaction, ranging from initial contact, cooperation, and coordination as preliminary stages, to collaboration and convergence at the higher and more complex ends of joint work and creativity. *Convergence* in particular represents a point of aspiration at which sustained collaboration displaces traditional departmental siloes within an organization's dominant routines and work-ways.

By the end of the CEEdO phase in fall 2017, Dr. Jackson had built a capable leadership team to execute a program of organizational development that foregrounded the advancement of instructional coherence. To be sure, central office leaders and staff varied in their embrace and up-take of specific strategic planning and continuous improvement practices. And systems to align and integrate the service provision strategies of central office departments to network offices and individual school needs were not yet sufficiently robust. Yet with some help from an improving budgetary situation, professional morale and confidence in December 2017 had improved markedly from the low point in winter 2016, while public confidence in district leadership was on the rise. An annual cadence of strategic planning and progress monitoring structures, routines, and tools had been instituted *across all academic departments* that enacted and normalized thoughtful analyses of the systemic causes of impediments to progress as a firmer foundation for theorizing paths of action, department goal-setting and the development of implementation strategies. And a culture of reciprocal accountability, intellectual challenge, and practice improvement was increasingly visible in the leadership practices and professional learning routines in use across the district.

In the third or CEO phase of development, beginning in December 2017, Dr. Jackson acceded the position of Chief Executive Officer following a scandal implicating CEO Forrest Claypool. While her elevation to CEO was precipitous, other circumstances boded well for her determination to extend the program of capacity building she had pursued among academic departments to the entire CPS organization. In fiscal terms, stemming in part from the sustained advocacy work of the "20 for 20" Campaign, a fortunate breakthrough was achieved in autumn 2017 around state funding levels for Chicago public schools. This meant significantly enhanced resources for neighborhood schools and targeted administrative services in the coming school year. And freshly released data from Stanford researcher Sean Reardon in autumn 2017 documented the surprising success of CPS classrooms in educating children of color when compared with suburban Illinois districts and most urban districts across the country. These developments reinforced a growing and hard-won sense of optimism among CPS staff that footholds on long intransigent challenges of equity and excellence could be secured, and that Dr. Jackson was the right leader at the right moment to extend a nascent culture of continuous improvement from the academic departments into the entire organization.

Starting from the development of an executive entry plan in winter 2018, Dr. Jackson worked with a high functioning core executive leadership team to frame and pursue five broad strategic objectives. The first objective involved integrating the extensive "operations side" of the CPS central office - functions as diverse as human resources, legal counsel, and student transportation - into a unified practice framework for strategic planning and continuous improvement (CI). Early steps in this process included: Introducing operations managers to the "Three Big Questions" with the challenge to reimagine their department priorities and implementation strategies in terms of their impact on student success; further developing strategic planning and data-informed performance management structures, routines, and tools to promote deeper collective thinking within departments about theories of action linking implementation steps to school and student impacts; and development of stronger communication routines between departments to break down traditional siloed functioning in favor of regular inter-departmental collaborations. Attention was also paid to developing dedicated roles for continuous improvement practice specialists to accelerate the uptake and improve the quality of CI structures through consultation, design improvement, and support of regular professional learning around CI routines and protocols.

A second critical objective involved establishing a regular cadence of executive team consultations designed to advance district planning and decision-making, along with a schedule of senior leadership professional learning experiences to elevate the team's capacity to practice both innovation and crisis management. She assembled an Executive Leadership Team (or ELT) from among central office executive officers and chiefs in functions most central to securing her strategic priorities. This group became the CEO's primary advisory body, and was designed to function to distribute decision-making and sense-making capacity to a cadre of well-prepared leaders and thought partners. Dr. Jackson challenged this group to understand their leadership charge beyond a narrow "hub and spokes" mindset, insisting instead that the committee members build habits and routines of networked communication that passed information quickly and reliably among committee members. Professional learning experiences included job-embedded collaborative assignments such as the completion of an "enterprise risk assessment" inventory for the entire district, as well as dedicated time for "out of the action" learning with leadership experts focused on ubiquitous problems of leadership practice. A similar mix of leadership development experiences was extended to central office staff through weekly convenings of all central office Chiefs – the Executive Cabinet – as well as larger quarterly convenings of department-level officers (e.g. Senior Leadership Team meetings).

While a steady schedule of professional learning experiences deepened shared understandings of the district's improvement agenda, a parallel cadence of individual meetings provided differentiated feedback to Chiefs and department directors. To anchor the provision of feedback and leadership growth, the CEO team expanded the practice of bi-weekly reports from academic leaders during the CEdO period to include the remaining operations officers. These meetings also became settings for job-embedded mentoring and feedback around problems of leadership practice. Over time, the seriousness of these bi-weekly report meetings for Chiefs spurred the development of aligned bi-weekly reporting chains from the team and project level, then up to the department and Office level, and on to the senior executive team. Dr. Jackson maintained her practice of reading as many bi-weekly Chiefs' reports as possible. This practice then seeded her weekly update meetings with the CEdO and COO, reduced unwanted surprises, and allowed her to engage Chiefs and department heads in a range of weekly settings in a well informed and appreciative manner. Chiefs we spoke with valued the bi-weekly reports and meetings as quality developmental opportunities. By winter of 2020, it is fair to say that CPS central office had become a setting for intensive professional leadership development, closely aligned to the learning demands of advancing a continuous improvement culture at all levels of the organization.

A third priority objective of the CEO period involved gaining strategic leverage on long-standing patterns of educational inequity and resource disparities by race, class, and zip code. Several initiatives were coordinated in order to build capacity and momentum around systemic inequity. First, the CEO commissioned the creation of an Equity Office and Chief Equity Officer position, beginning in February 2018. Assigning Chief-level status to the equity portfolio assured that the new Chief would participate in Cabinet-level deliberations, and thereby engage and influence every other office and department in the organization. Second, and consistent with Dr. Jackson's high regard for "leadership by framework," the Equity Office was tasked with leading a research and public consultation process that would yield a district Equity Framework within a year. This framework would function both as the district's public-facing commitment statement and conceptual lens around how to institutionalize anti-racist practices, while anchoring specific tools and protocols by which to integrate equity thinking into every department's strategic planning and outcome measurement processes. Third, information from the Equity Framework public consultation process was integrated into the parallel effort to update and extend the district's vision framework, "Success Starts Here," so as to elevate equity as the governing principle surrounding all other priority district goals. The resulting five-year vision framework released in spring 2019 clearly signaled the district's commitment to intensify strategic action and resource alignment around inequitable patterns of access to excellent instruction, opportunities, and resources.

Finally, several initiatives were underway to create more powerful systems and structures to address specific generators of inequity around the district, and put teeth into the renewed vision's goals and commitments. The Office of Talent's "Opportunity Schools" Initiative, for example, targets for intervention the 10% of schools in the district which annually experience the most difficulty filling their positions with highly qualified teachers, while also posting the district's highest teacher attrition rates. The initiative engaged with principals to bring extra resources to bear at the point of hire, while working with Instructional Leadership Teams on improved teacher supports to reduce attrition. Another data-driven initiative, the Annual Regional Analysis (or ARA), provides parents and community advocates with a wide range of data bearing on school choice and enrollment levels as well as school academic performance information with particular attention to better understanding inequitable distributions of resources around the system. The ARA is intended as a core resource for an annual Request for Proposals (RFP) process designed to allow a wider range of parents and community groups from around the city to advocate for new programs in under-served schools and neighborhoods.

A fourth priority objective of the CEO period involved institutionalizing an ethos of customer service at every level of CPS, but particularly starting with central office departments. The resulting customer service campaign was a logical extension of the foundational messaging to academic departments during the CEdO period, that is, to disrupt mindsets and practices that frustrate rather than meet the needs of schools and families. Steps taken toward embedding customer service awareness throughout the district included developing and improving a set of training modules to conduct with staff in departments with particularly high levels of interaction with school staff and parents, and creating deeper capacity for responsive customer service within the existing School Support Center. An interesting finding from our interviews was that the adoption of the language of customer service and its codification as a framework was particularly welcomed by operations leaders, many of whom came to CPS with prior corporate backgrounds, and were seeking alignment to the priorities of the new CEO.

A fifth priority objective of the CEO period involved the continued effort to align more effectively the work of central office departments with that of Network offices in order to better differentiate supports for the improvement work of schools, particularly those serving Chicago's highest need communities. As Dr. Jackson's tenure progressed, it became increasingly clear that the challenges facing strategic planning at the Network level were twofold: first, to develop a format for strategic plans that linked each network's agenda around a coherent set of common aims, while allowing plans to differentiate effectively between the resource needs of distinct categories of schools; and second, to sustain a flow of relevant information between the three levels throughout the year in ways that helped schools to adapt and improve. In response the CEO staff, the Office of Teaching and Learning (T&L), and ONS-based continuous improvement staff intensified efforts to equip network office staffs to integrate information from schools' CIWPs and central office departments into network strategic plans, in part by improving consultation channels between network offices and central office departments. One off-shoot of this line of discussion involved delivery of joint professional learning for Instructional Support Leaders (ISLs) by the Office of T&L and ONS, rather than by ONS alone, so as to elevate the ISLs' role as brokers of information and supports flowing to teachers, and increase their capacity to advance curricular initiatives such as the Curriculum Equity Initiative (CEI). Other promising innovations include re-development and networking of four network offices exclusively around high schools and their improvement challenges, with Chiefs selected for their demonstrated expertise in high school improvement and principal development, forming a "High School Resource Hub Collaborative."

The case narrative concludes with overviews of two innovative projects representing the frontiers of capacity within the district to overcome siloed administrative and planning behaviors, and design structures to sustain complex, collaborative innovation activities – that is, to achieve "convergence." The first, *Vision Collaboratives* (VCs), were initiated to elevate communication and cross-department planning and coordination necessary to accomplish the highest priority goals and public commitments

expressed in the district's five-year vision, "Success Starts Here." At the time of our interviews VCs were in the early phases of organization, and were conceived as collaborative platforms on which departments could adapt the district's CI toolbox to identifying powerful levers for advancing vision goals among departments and teams with a common stake in a broad area of district practice. The second project, the *Curriculum Equity Initiative* (CEI), is arguably the most audacious and complex design and development plan ever fielded by CPS. It aspires to build a robust district-wide digital curriculum repository to address two fundamental equity challenges: first, clear disparities in the quality of curricular materials available to students in schools across the city; and second, the burden on teachers to self-finance access to high quality materials. Our consideration of CEI keys on the enactment of rapid collaborative design cycles between external curricular partners and CPS departments, leveraging many of the continuous improvement structures already operating in the district. The success of both Vision Collaboratives and CEI depends particularly on the skill and adaptive expertise of program managers with enhanced capacity to build trust and collective accountability across traditional departmental boundaries.

Primary Findings

The concluding section of the case returns to the initial six research questions and provides detailed responses to each. Here we focus on two questions: first, evidence of the core accomplishments of Dr. Jackson's program of district transformation from fall 2015 through fall 2019 (RQ5), and second, two areas of leadership learning that Dr. Jackson herself drew from her CEo/CEO experiences (RQ6). Research question #5 inquired: *Over time, what were the most prominent successes and impacts of the CEO's institutional revitalization program on the culture and capacity of the district? Did these advances translate to measurable gains in key metrics of professional capacity and student success?* Our body of evidence points to at least six enhancements of district capacity by winter 2020:

First, our interviews testified to an observable shift in the professional culture and climate of the district, and particularly at the central office level. In contrast to the palpable demoralization following budget and staffing cuts through early 2016, many central office staffers in 2019 and early 2020 described their work environment and professional interactions in terms of relational trust, reciprocal accountability, personal and collective efficacy, and internal attribution for performance. The central office staff we interviewed valorized the competence and commitment of their colleagues, identified with the principles and goals of the district's vision, and reported a renewed sense of pride in the district's senior leadership and its legitimacy in the eyes of district stakeholders.

This is not to say that Dr. Jackson's agenda to socialize and align all central office offices and departments into rigorous, disciplined cycles of continuous improvement was received without implementation challenges, conflict, or dissent. Both our meeting observations and document analyses revealed variation in the quality of execution of strategic planning and continuous improvement (CI) leadership practices, for example, around competence in the use of root cause analyses or the development of coherent theories of action. A significant number of chiefs and department directors voiced frustration with the complexity and technical clumsiness of some strategic planning tools. And there was concern among senior district leaders about the time and capacity demands of CI-related planning and related meetings in a continued context of lean department staffing and resources. Discussion of these issues by interviewees, however, tended to be couched within a deepening professional commitment to solving problems of CI practice and making those practices more sustainable.

Second, the evidence points to a robust re-launch of performance management structures and routines together with a successful pivot toward norms and analytic routines characteristic of a continuous improvement ethos and mindset. By fall 2018, all central office departments, network offices, and over 600 schools were enacting continuous improvement routines with a core of common practices, creating at least the potential for more powerful alignment and communication between the three system levels. And

a new generation of cross-functional leadership roles was created to foster closer articulation between central office and network-level strategic planning. While compliance anxieties and mindsets were not fully displaced, department-level strategic review sessions (beginning-, middle- and end-of-year) were increasingly conducted as collegial discussions of shared problems of practice around goal attainment, using tools enacting root cause and gap analysis. Further, norms and expectations linked to convergence across central office units were beginning to support improved cross-department communication and better strategic coordination when compared with prior CPS administrations. This seemed particularly apparent across the traditional macro-level divisions between operational and academic offices.

Third, the program of collective and job-embedded professional learning routines for central office leaders converged to sustain and improve the execution of continuous improvement routines at an ambitious pace, while also building the capacity of senior leaders to collaborate around decision-making and organize to respond adaptively to emerging crises. The organization of collective learning in the Cabinet setting facilitated the establishing of a professional learning community with clear norms of accountability for applying learning to unit operations. And the one-to-one cycles of reporting and feedback between central office chiefs and CEEdO/CEO supported a differentiated approach to chiefs' leadership growth. By winter 2020, consistent implementation of these learning and reporting cycles in a regular sequence and cadence, along with intentional hiring of new senior staff with continuous improvement experience, were yielding a senior leadership cadre sharing a core language and stronger common understanding of the district's CI ethos and methodology. This created a foundation for accelerating the improvement of unit-level CI structures, while enabling efforts to deploy CI approaches to more ambitious cross-functional leadership of structures such as Vision Collaboratives.

Fourth, while budget restrictions slowed initial progress in the CEEdO period, the district gradually built a technical and data-system infrastructure to address the need for timely and accurate data within CI strategic plans as well as the monitoring of vision goals, and the creation of the envisioned linkages between CI plans across the three system levels. In addition to meeting the full range of standard functions of an IT office in a massive, communications- and data-rich organization, the Office of Information and Technology Services (ITS) established an "Enterprise Transformation Office" to anticipate the IT requirements of ambitious next generation projects such as the Curriculum Equity Initiative and the forthcoming partnership with City Colleges of Chicago, the "Chicago Roadmap." The Office of ITS will be a central partner with the Office of Network Support and the CEO Office in mounting a new unified platform for CI plans and data sources across the district's three levels, allowing the schools' priority service needs as expressed in their CIWP's to be communicated efficiently to network chiefs and central office staff.

Fifth, building on methods of strategic continuous improvement, cross-functional collaboration, and technical infrastructure, the CPS central office demonstrated significant capacity to mount, execute, and sustain "enterprise-scale" initiatives to advance instructional coherence and secure equity objectives. While the Curriculum Equity Initiative (CEI) was the most expansive of these projects, other consequential initiatives included GoCPS (addressing equitable access to enrollment opportunities); Lead with CPS (expanding a leadership pipeline through support of a spectrum of leader development resources and experiences for teachers and administrators); and the Annual Regional Analysis or ARA (establishing a deep data portrait of 16 city regions tagged to CPS schools, facilitating a more equitable process of distributing CPS curricula and programs to city schools). These initiatives challenged central office staff to develop stronger project and change management competencies paired with high collective efficacy, along with deeper capacity to collaborate on the design of technical and iterative design systems. These skills built directly from 3-4 years of professional learning and job-embedded practice in the enactment of continuous improvement routines.

Sixth, the district also built capacity to integrate external partnerships into its strategies to advance strategic and instructional coherence. To be sure, this capacity capitalized on over three decades of collaboration with reform-oriented organizations in Chicago, and most notably with the UChicago Consortium, the Chicago Community Trust, and the Chicago Public Education Fund (CPEF), among others. But by aligning an organizational engagement strategy closely to its primary vision goals, and investing in partnership management structures within the Children First Fund and the Department of School Quality, Measurement & Research (SQMR), the district imposed heightened discipline on the selection and engagement of funders and other partners. The district used the same organizational structures to assure funders and corporate partners of greater CPS accountability and transparency around the accomplishment of projected outcomes. In addition, the district evidenced growing levels of *absorptive capacity* in its transactions with external experts, building collaborative structures and routines to exchange information and sustain joint inquiry into shared problems of practice (Farrell & Coburn, 2017). Heightened absorptive capacity in projects like CEI was rooted in habits of job-embedded professional learning that were rehearsed regularly within CPS' continuous improvement routines.

Finally, while this case study could not investigate causal links between Dr. Jackson's aligned strategies for district transformation and progress on the district's vision goals, there was early evidence that CPS was advancing on several metrics at a pace sufficient to meet those goals over five years. In a September 2020 progress report on the five-year vision goals, CPS distinguishes three progress rates: percentages on-track to achieve the goal; percentages improving but not on pace to meet the goal; and percentages "losing ground on their goal" (i.e. not improving). Four metrics indicated one-year rates of change on-track to meet the district's ambitious goals: four- and five-year high school graduation rates; percentage of CPS graduates with passing grades on AP exams; and the percentage of CPS elementary students meeting or exceeding the mean national percentile one-year growth ranking (grades 2-8) on the NWEA reading assessment. Three other metrics were improving but not at a rate sufficient to hit the five-year target. And eight metrics presented largely flat rates of growth from SY 2018 to SY 2019, and thus were deemed "losing ground on their goal." Perhaps as important, the progress report makes good on a pledge by the district to transparency and clarity in updating the public on its success in meeting priority goals, including breakouts by gender and racial sub-group.

Research question #6 inquired: *What leadership lessons did the CEO draw from her efforts to shift institutional culture and capacity toward continuous improvement practices?* One fundamental insight that Dr. Jackson drew from her transition to CEO involved the underlying unity between what might seem like two very different leadership challenges – those of change or innovation management, on the one hand, and crisis management, on the other. As she put it, referencing a particularly threatening situation in 2018, "I do think that from a leadership standpoint, it's not just about the innovation side. It is about the management side too. And the same principles that I believe are important when you're launching a new initiative - I used those principles when we were responding to this issue."

What were these principles? Recall that upon entering the CEO role, Dr. Jackson quickly identified a tension between advancing her strategic priorities and securing her agenda and the district from a daunting range of tactical risks, both "known-knowns" and "known-unknowns." This tension was both organizational and personal. If she was to buffer the organization from potentially derailing eruptions she would need to identify and mitigate the risks expeditiously. And if she was to maintain energy for advancing strategic aims, then she had to minimize the inevitable time she had to spend in "fire-fighting" mode. Thus she quickly organized a disciplined, protocol-driven inquiry process to surface, categorize, and rank order a range of institutional threats, and develop a set of mitigation strategies to bring these dangers to heel. And in terms of adaptivity, she brought several features of her strategic innovation approach into the sphere of crisis management. She enacted a mindset of transparency, sense-making, and iterative learning for her immediate circle of senior advisors. She distributed and authorized responsibility for learning a process of threat anticipation and mitigation among those advisors, making them a more

crisis-ready team. The same principles of strategic and innovative response were brought to bear under conditions of actual crisis management. The discussion explores the CEO team's response to the earliest and arguably most dangerous of crises in May 2018, when an explosive investigation by the Chicago Tribune entitled "Betrayed" revealed a long and disturbing legacy of unaddressed sexual abuse allegations going back decades and implicating both district employees and students. Again, what is most evident in her response is continuity with the principles and practices she had applied as CEEdO and CEO to the cultivation of public support and internal capacity for innovation and continuous improvement.

A second issue around which Dr. Jackson's thinking evolved during the study was the observation in herself and others that, as Marshall Goldsmith (2010) puts it, "What got you here won't get you there." That is, success and effectiveness at one level of leadership in a large organization is no guarantee of success at higher levels of responsibility and authority. In Dr. Jackson's experience as a developer of leaders, this phenomenon arises from individual leader's limitations as they transact with the demands of new positions, as well as from limitations in CPS organizational culture. And it can be exacerbated by promotion policies that move promising leaders too quickly into executive positions without suitable training and supports. Regarding individual limitations, Dr. Jackson was aware in her own case that a strong capacity for pattern finding and systems thinking had supported her practice of adaptive leadership at every stage of her career. But the sheer scope of the CEO position and the district as a system had begun to outstrip even her knack for sense-making in sprawling, complex problem spaces. Her greatest asset in addressing this challenge was her strong learner's stance, which allowed her to access the district's deep expertise in critical knowledge areas in an explicit and visible manner, and build a senior team with a proclivity for pattern finding similar to her own.

The same discontinuities in individual readiness for the next steps in leadership were evident to Dr. Jackson as a leadership supervisor. For example, the dominant assumption built into the selection of Network Chiefs (NCs) – that success as a principal was the sine qua non for success as a principal supervisor – routinely fell short in NC's actual performance. Closer analysis revealed an entire skill set around coaching and developmental feedback that successful principals in an accountability-driven system did not necessarily develop, but which was essential to building capacity in a network of principals. As she observed, "...all of these people are high performing principals in their own right...but just because you lead a good school doesn't mean you're ready to lead adults." This faulty assumption thus led to high rates of turnover in the NC position annually, weakening the capacity of networks as a support for school improvement. In turn, Dr. Jackson engaged several academic chiefs intensively around a wide range of dispositional and mindset issues that undermined their capacity to build team cohesion, advance CI practice, and engage external constituencies effectively. These individuals had risen high in an organization that was increasingly selective and competitive in its hiring practices. But it remained an organization without deep systems for identifying and developing leadership talent based on a well-articulated framework and principles, particularly above the level of school leadership practice.

To fill this gap, Dr. Jackson and her team evolved a continuum of leadership development opportunities and settings with at least three related aims; first, to build a community of leadership practice focused on the specific demands of continuous organizational improvement (e.g. the Executive Cabinet); second, to provide adept and tailored feedback to individual managers around specific problems of unit leadership and team-based practice (e.g. the bi-weekly feedback meetings); and third, to provide advanced leadership preparation experiences gauged to the next steps in responsibility and authority – that is, to deepening the leadership bench (e.g. the Northwestern University executive learning sessions). This third category of experiences included participation in internal committees and advisory boards in which members were encouraged to approach their activities as active learning experiences in addition to service opportunities and professional recognition. Other experiences were designed in partnership with expert external collaborators and elite professional learning providers. These "out-of-the-action" leadership engagements complemented the daily participation of CPS leaders in job-embedded professional learning activities

with carefully scaffolded reflective experiences in the company of diverse colleagues from other backgrounds and school systems. Without access to such developmental resources in her own training Dr. Jackson doubted whether her school leadership experiences alone would have equipped her to step up to executive level system responsibility in CPS.

References

- Asada, Y., Turner, L., Schwartz, M., & Chriqui, J. F. (2020). "Bridging, brokering, and buffering": A theoretical exploration of school leaders' engagement with local school wellness policy implementation. *Implementation Science Communications*, 1, 1-11.
- Cobb, P., Jackson, K., Henrick, E. C., Smith, T. M., & MIST team. (2018). *Systems for instructional improvement: Creating coherence from the classroom to the district office*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Durand, F. T., Lawson, H. A., Wilcox, K. C., & Schiller, K. S. (2016). The role of district office leaders in the adoption and implementation of the Common Core State Standards in elementary schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 52(1), 45-74.
- Farrell, C. C., & Coburn, C. E. (2017). Absorptive capacity: A conceptual framework for understanding district central office learning. *Journal of Educational Change*, 18(2), 135-159.
- Fullan, M., & Quinn, J. (2015). *Coherence: The right drivers in action for schools, districts, and systems*. Corwin Press.
- Glennan Jr, T. K., & Resnick, L. B. (2004). School districts as learning organizations: A strategy for scaling education reform. In Glennan, T. K., Bodilly, S. J., Galegher, J., & Kerr, K. A., *Expanding the reach of educational reforms: Perspectives from leaders in the scale-up of educational interventions*, 517-563. Rand Corporation.
- Goldsmith, M. (2010). *What got you here won't get you there: How successful people become even more successful*. Profile books.
- Heifetz, R. (2006). Anchoring leadership in the work of adaptive progress. *The Leader of the Future*, 2, 73-84.
- Hiebert, J., Gallimore, R., & Stigler, J. W. (2002). A knowledge base for the teaching profession: What would it look like and how can we get one? *Educational researcher*, 31(5), 3-15.
- Honig, M. I. (2008). District central offices as learning organizations: How sociocultural and organizational learning theories elaborate district central office administrators' participation in teaching and learning improvement efforts. *American Journal of Education*, 114(4), 627-664.
- Honig, M. I., & Hatch, T. C. (2004). Crafting coherence: How schools strategically manage multiple, external demands. *Educational Researcher*, 33(8), 16-30.
- Hubbard, L. A., Stein, M. K., & Mehan, H. (2006, 2013). *Reform as learning: School reform, organizational culture, and community politics in San Diego*. Routledge.
- Knapp, M. S., Honig, M. I., Plecki, M. L., Portin, B. S., & Copland, M. A. (2014). *Learning-focused leadership in action: Improving instruction in schools and districts*. Routledge.
- Leithwood, K., & Azah, V. N. (2017). Characteristics of high-performing school districts. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 16(1), 27-53.
- McDaniel Jr, R. R. (2007). Management strategies for complex adaptive systems sense-making, learning, and improvisation. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 20(2), 21-41.
- National Research Council. (2000). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school* (Expanded Edition). J. D. Bransford, A. L. Brown, R. R. Cocking, & S. Donovan (Eds.). Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning and Committee on Learning Research and Educational Practice. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- National Research Council, Donovan, S., & Bransford, J. (2005). *How students learn*. National Academies Press.
- Panero, N. S., & Talbert, J. E. (2013). *Strategic inquiry: Starting small for big results in education*. Harvard Education Press.

Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. Broadway Business.

Senge, P. M., McCabe, N. H., Lucas, T., & Kleiner, A. (2000; 2012). *Schools that learn*. New York, NY: Currency.

Supovitz, J. A. (2006). *The Case for District-Based Reform: Leading, Building, and Sustaining School Improvement*. Harvard Education Press.

Zorich, D. M., Waibel, G., & Erway, R. (2008). *Beyond the silos of the LAMs: Collaboration among libraries, archives and museums*. Dublin, OH: OCLC Research.