



Benchmark

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Beyond the Emperor’s New Clothes: The Role of the Central Office in Systemwide Instructional Improvement

By Larry Leverett

In the field of comprehensive school reform, there is a growing awareness among educators, researchers, and state and district leaders that the central office is critical in implementing and sustaining school reforms. In this article, Larry Leverett, former Superintendent of the Plainfield Public School District in New Jersey and currently Superintendent of Schools in Greenwich, Connecticut, shares his professional wisdom on the difficulties districts encounter in sustaining reform and identifies effective practices that support schools and instructional improvement.

Introduction

The Hans Christian Anderson fable, “The Emperor’s New Clothes,”¹ provides an interesting way to think about the impact of central office-led efforts to advance systemwide instructional improvement. School district leaders often perceive changes made in a school district differently from those who are asked to implement them at the school and class-

¹“The Emperor’s New Clothes,” by Hans Christian Anderson (1837), is the story of a vain emperor who was convinced to purchase a set of clothes made from a new, well-researched fabric that was invisible to anyone who was “too stupid and incompetent” to appreciate its quality. Although the Emperor can see neither the fabric nor the clothes, he voices no concerns fearing he will be exposed as stupid and ignorant. Maintaining the illusion of fine new clothes, the Emperor parades through the streets realizing that the child who yells out the truth of his nakedness is right.

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room level. Too often, the accounts of how well things are going do not match up with the reality of implementation at the most critical point of impact—the classroom. Superintendents and others proclaim the success of the marvelously rich “fabric” that has been carefully woven to support instructional improvement, and the changes are heralded as being widely apparent to all onlookers. The problem, as the child cried out in the centuries old fable, is that the changes made as a result of the reforms often are without substance and have not resulted in higher levels of achievement for all students. The truth: little or nothing has really changed where principals lead, teachers teach, and children learn.

There was once a time when the central office could be perceived as successful by the volume of reform strategies introduced and the amount of activity generated across the district. School district leaders appeared as capable, competent reformers and received the confidence of their respective publics for their heroic efforts to improve schools. Many slogans and symbols gave the appearance that things would soon be better. Superintendents and central office staff constantly summoned the best experts to install the latest solutions to longstanding achievement problems. As superintendents changed, different experts were summoned to bring in new solutions while the old ones were dismantled. Occasionally, ceremonies and reports would identify how one or two schools embraced the changes, while the focus was diffused from other schools that were not making changes. The superintendent and others at the district level trumpeted the few notable changes and created a message of rhetorical excellence, while lagging schools were faulted for their failure to embrace the change brought by the experts.

The people who worked in schools were never certain about which organizations offered the right interventions—interventions that addressed the need to change and their beliefs about their schools. The central office staff was not able to sustain a focus and indeed was fragmented in support of the experts and their solutions. New ideas continued to abound, but few of them ever lasted long enough to know whether a difference in student learning could have been achieved. Meanwhile, the teachers and principals on the front line managed to survive the changes by paying little attention to the steady bombardment of new ideas introduced by new experts hired by new superintendents.

Many staff learned that the way to survive was to pretend that change was occurring and to engage in “happy talk” about the wonders of the new interventions in their infrequent and generally ceremonial interactions with the superintendent and central office dignitaries. As soon as possible, however, they resumed doing their work as they had prior to the changes, and neither the central office nor the new superintendent knew the difference. Over time, the same few schools continued to be effective in educating students and others in the district languished, leaving their children behind. After all, nothing much had changed in the district. As always, “the more things changed, the more they remained the same” was continuously proven.

But, there are some hopeful signs that the emperor’s clothes are taking on more substance.

The Central Office Is Vital to Systemwide Instructional Improvement

Today, there is a growing acceptance of the vital role the central office plays in driving systemwide improvement that impacts the capacity of all schools to increase the achievement of all students. The central office is accountable for ensuring that students have access to a learning experience that is connected to standards and supported by a high-quality curriculum, receive instruction delivered by a well-prepared staff, and are a part of a system that aligns all aspects of learning to the instructional focus.

For several decades, researchers and reformers have carefully documented the achievements

of schools working effectively under the most difficult circumstances. It has been difficult, however, to identify large numbers of districts that have been successful in improving all schools throughout the district. Unfortunately, due to its failure to provide leadership and support for the reform of curriculum, instruction, and assessment in ways that impact all schools within the district, the central office is sometimes seen as an impediment to student success. Heeding the call, there are several significant initiatives that are making useful information available and offer sound guidance to central offices.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era in education has stimulated renewed interest in building the capacity of the central office to lead and support systemwide improvement. There will continue to be schools that can do it on their

Accessing the Research: Resources for Systemwide Change

A District Leader's Guide to Relationships that Support Systemic Change, School Communities that Work (2003).

The article summarizes the findings of a study commissioned by School Communities that Work that examined the relationship between school districts and reform support organizations (RSOs). The article describes key factors in creating a relationship between school districts and RSOs that fosters sustained change and improvement. School Communities that Work: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts was established in 2000 by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. For the full report visit: www.schoolcommunities.org.

Changing District Culture and Capacity: The Impact of the Merck Institute for Science Education Partnership, Tom Corcoran and Nancy Lawrence (2003).

The report, from the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, gives the findings of a study that examined four school districts that worked closely with the Merck Institute for Science Education (MISE), a reform support organization, for ten years. The report analyzes the roles of the district in instructional improvement, the impact of the partnership on the district, and lessons learned. For more information visit: www.cpre.org.

own, but the “one school at a time” approach to instructional improvement is no longer acceptable. Foundations, education departments at colleges and universities, educational researchers, and regional and national educational laboratories are beginning to generate a body of knowledge and experience that can guide the efforts of superintendents and central office staff to have a greater impact on advancing systemwide instructional improvement.

Coherent approaches to systemwide instructional improvement require central office leadership and support. This article reflects the advice from the experience of a district leader, with a long history of concern about the relationship between district leadership and the outcome of higher achievement for all students, who has embraced this knowledge and applied it in schools.

Coherent, Systemwide, Instructional Improvement Requires a Coherent Central Office

Central office staff members must have a clear line of sight between their work and the work of the schools. Working in new ways requires superintendents and the central office team to commit to a clear focus supported by a unified set of values and to work processes that foster a coherent, systemwide change agenda (Dlugosh & Sybouts, 1994). This requires school districts to move away from a central office structure that is highly fragmented and compartmentalized to one that is unified and integrated in support of a common instructional focus. A coherent systemwide approach that impacts all schools occurs when the roles, responsibilities, and the functions of all central office units, instructional and non-instructional, are aligned to support the district’s instruc-

tional focus. Coherent systemwide change requires that central office staff define their work in terms of what is necessary to support improved instructional practice in all schools (Learning First Alliance, 2003). The business office, human resources, federal and mandated programs, curriculum instruction, English as a second language (ESL)/bilingual education, special education, student transportation and facilities must connect their work to the instructional focus in ways that are tangible, measurable and supportive of the changes that schools are being asked to make.

All staff members in the central office must be expected to understand how their work contributes to helping schools improve conditions of teaching and learning. The shared connection of work among the central office staff creates a shared sense of purpose, which allows staff to consistently model the district’s mission and values in interactions at all levels of the organization. The central office is then capable of providing the coherency and consistency that school-level educators need to overcome cynicism wrought by poorly supported and frequently changed initiatives. Silos of independent, segmented decision-making that spin schools in many directions must be replaced with integrated efforts across the central office to reduce opportunities for messages that are incongruent with the systemwide instructional focus. The instructional focus must become everyone’s work at all levels of the district. Derived from professional experience and research on the central office, see the seven attributes of a coherent central office on page 6 (Learning First Alliance, 2003; Learning Point Associates, 2002).

Promising Practices that Support Coherent, Systemwide Change

Communications and relationships influence the trust between the central office and the schools. Too often communications are one-way and the relationships are sterile and provide few opportunities for the players to experience working together on a common agenda. Isolation of the central office from the schools and the classrooms results in the central office staff not having the information and knowledge to help principals and teachers achieve the system's instructional goals. Reliance upon reports, assessment data, and other artifacts of district information management systems cannot be the exclusive sources of data about the efforts of school-level educators to connect their work to a systemwide focus. Infrequent public relations visits or empty ceremonial visits are not enough to build the knowledge the central office must have to be informed and to be of assistance to schools and teachers. New practices are needed to support a coherent systemwide instructional agenda.

Collaborative Approaches

Helpful approaches to increasing support and assistance to schools and teachers involve opportunities for sustained contact and productive work integrating the efforts of central office staff with school-level educators.

Principal Networks

Principal networks bring principals together on a regular basis to deepen their knowledge about teaching and learning and to increase their awareness of the standards, curriculum, and instructional delivery systems that align with the district focus. Regular monthly or bi-

monthly meetings replace the administrative-trivia agenda items that can be communicated via memos or other means so that agendas can be collaboratively developed and focused on instructional content. Central office instructional staff provide support for principals in building a learning network focused on raising student achievement. The most successful networks are led and managed by principals and are responsive to their needs. They also provide opportunities for intra-district school visitations and promote vertical and horizontal articulation of standards, curriculum and assessment, as well as the calibration of student performance expectations through the review of student work.

School-Level Team Liaisons

School-level teams are often organized to support school-level improvement efforts. Central office staff members assigned as liaisons on a sustained basis provide opportunities to build the connections between the central office and schools. Central office liaisons facilitate communications, build the connections between the work of the district and that of schools, broker resources, and bring back knowledge from the field concerning the implementation challenges experienced by school-level educators. Liaison assignments are more effective when the same person works with the same school or group of schools over an extended timeframe, perhaps for several school years. Successful integration into the school team requires the central office staff member to step away from the usual role, i.e., enforcement, telling and directing. Schools have legitimate reasons to be skeptical of the "I'm from the central office and I am here to help you" message. It is, therefore, necessary to provide training and coaching to

Positive Attributes of a Central Office

Clear Instructional Focus

The instructional focus is clearly defined and communicated and mobilizes the resources of the entire school community to promote shared understanding and commitment to achieving the focus. Sustaining a clear instructional focus requires that the central office team has the knowledge and skills necessary to improve the core functions of teaching and learning. Investments must be made to ensure that solid and reliable knowledge is developed concerning standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Multi-year Commitment to the Instructional Focus

The central office provides leadership to sustain a multi-year, tightly focused effort carefully aligned with the instructional focus. Special effort is undertaken to buffer the commitment from the turnover that often threatens sustaining a focus over time.

Existence of a Locally Supported Accountability System

Accountability is promoted as a collective responsibility of all district employees. Internal accountability at all levels must reflect the influence of important external demands such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) or state-generated mandates. Additionally, internal accountability systems must be designed to buffer schools from having to contend with multiple and often time-consuming, competing systems of accountability.

Values, Behaviors and Characteristics that Support the Instructional Focus

The “do as I say, not as I do” approach is detrimental to the goals of coherent systemwide instructional change. The credible central office aligns its “walk” with its “talk.”

Strong Connections with Schools

Redesigning the work of central office staff to have greater intimacy with the work of schools helps to establish new norms for communications and relationships needed to sustain coherent systemwide change. Central office staff must be prepared to work in new ways to achieve the benefits of increased interaction.

Tools to Support Interdependency of Roles and Functions

Integration of work processes, interdepartmental collaboration, and the negotiation of resources require new tools to facilitate new ways of working. A repertoire of tools—proactive strategies and techniques for conflict resolution, problem-solving, facilitation of group processes, and shared decision-making—help to maintain communications and relationships when the inevitable conflicts of change emerge. Conflict is a part of any change process, and how it is managed influences the movement toward organizational goals. Building capacity to give “warm” and “cool” feedback is one skill set to improve individual and group performance. The African proverb, “While the elephants fight, the ants are crushed,” illustrates the importance of building district capacity to manage the challenges inherent in systemwide change. The use of these tools can greatly enhance and maintain the communications and relationships needed to sustain the reform focus.

Professional Development of the Central Office Staff

The attributes important to a central office require investment in the development of capacity, knowledge and skills of central office staff members who will be required to work in different ways with each other and with schools. Simply mandating new ways of working will not result in more productive central office units or district leadership. Well-designed, job-embedded, capacity-building efforts that are sustained over time will develop and maintain productive working relationships.

develop the skill set needed for the liaison to serve as an effective resource for school teams.

Collaborative Walkthroughs

The classroom is the litmus test for district progress toward coherency across schools. Visits to classrooms by central office administrators accompanied by the principal, coaches, mentors, and other school-level educators provide first hand information about the extent to which the district focus has impacted instructional practice. Walkthroughs help school staff at different levels of implementation of the district’s instructional focus and can provide specific data to help them rise to a higher level of implementation. They also inform participating central office staff of the needs of schools and the extent to which the instructional focus is evident across all schools. Districts and schools with healthy relationships and openness may invite parents and community members to participate in these walkthroughs as a means of connecting them with the work of schools.

Collaborative walkthroughs must be transparent, safe, focused, and organized for a specific purpose that is well communicated to the school staff in advance of the visit. The “gotcha” mentality will damage credibility and feed cynicism and distrust if it is evident during these visits. Engaging school-level educators in walkthrough planning helps build trust and permits a school to target areas in which they would like feedback. The purpose of the walkthrough is not to judge, but rather to provide feedback, reinforcement, encouragement, and if necessary, to establish a sense of urgency for both district- and school-level educators to accelerate efforts toward the instructional focus. Feedback and follow-up are important

outgrowths of the walkthrough. Feedback should be provided to teachers individually and then to the school team using an “S.O.S” format—which identifies strengths, opportunities for improvement, and strategies for improvement.

Role-Alike Forums for Coaches, Mentors and Instructional Specialists

Attainment of a coherent instructional focus across all schools has a much higher probability of success when a shared understanding of a common language exists. Role-alike groups that involve school-level educators working in similar instructional support roles can promote shared understanding of strategies related to the academic focus. Engaging school-level team leaders, coaches and mentors helps to reinforce the essential components of the instructional improvement agenda. Commitment to regular, ongoing capacity-building forums builds strength across the hierarchy and expands the number of staff members with the knowledge and skills required to support the district’s instructional focus.

Re-Thinking Accountability

NCLB will be a focal point for America’s public schools for the foreseeable future. The rigorous test-driven external accountability system demands the attention of the nation’s schools as they work to improve test scores, participation rates, sub-group performance, employment of qualified staff and to respond to other NCLB accountability measures. Local support and buy-in are needed to accomplish the mandates of the most stringent external accountability system for public schools in the history of the nation. The absence of commitment and support from district- and school-level educators to mobilize the spirit of change is a signifi-

cant barrier to be overcome if the intent of these reforms is to be achieved.

Aligning External Accountability Demands with Local Efforts

The central office has the important role of aligning external accountability demands with local efforts to improve standards-based instructional practice. Douglas B. Reeves, a leading voice in the accountability movement, argues that if accountability is to reach its potential as a constructive force in education, then it must include not only test scores, but also the critical variables that are involved in increasing student performance on tests (Reeve, 2001). Richard Elmore, Harvard Education Professor, maintains that external accountability must be preceded by internal accountability. The central office has the unique challenge of blending what is required externally with an internal accountability framework that guides school personnel at all levels in terms of norms and expectations about teaching and learning (Elmore, 2002).

An effective internal accountability system is results oriented, integrates school and central office level expectations, includes clear expectations for instructional and non-instructional operations and staff, and is based on best practices and sound research. Communications, frequent monitoring of progress in student performance and instructional practice, public reporting and continuous feedback are critical design features needed to align the focus and effort of district and school personnel.

Internal accountability frameworks will lack credibility if the central office fails to address the normative beliefs, values and practices that define the district climate and culture. Building

commitment to the internal accountability framework demands that staff and community have multiple opportunities to participate in shaping the system. Districts should use well-planned public engagement strategies to gather input, educate the public, and build support for practices, processes, and measurement components. Moving the locus of accountability and responsibility to one that is shared within the broader education community will undoubtedly have the impact of being responsive to external accountability mandates.

Conclusion

I believe as Ron Edmonds, founder of the Effective Schools Movement, believed, “We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far” (1979, p. 23). Meaningful change—supportive systemwide approaches to standards, curriculum, instruction and assessment—will not be attained unless we are willing to admit that the invisible thread that holds together the pieces of the reform cloth are not achieving the desired results: strong and durable, schools and classrooms. We have the choice of continuing to parade non-existent “new clothes” or to develop the substance of instructional improvement that can be visible to all in the results achieved by students, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, language proficiency, gender or family structure.

The choice is ours to make as leaders charged with the responsibility to drive systemwide instructional improvement across the schools of our districts. I believe we know enough,

have a growing number of models for adaptation to our own local context, and now must summon the will for the central office team to be at the helm in guiding school systems toward successfully educating all children. Our charge is to provide all children with a quality education to help prepare them for future productive roles in society. It is no longer acceptable to proclaim the beauty of a fabric that does not exist in actuality.

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