

# THE ROLE OF THE DISTRICT IN DRIVING SCHOOL REFORM

A Review for  
The Denver Commission on Secondary School Reform

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A REVIEW FOR THE DENVER COMMISSION  
ON SECONDARY SCHOOL REFORM

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# THE ROLE OF THE DISTRICT IN DRIVING SCHOOL REFORM: A REVIEW FOR THE DENVER COMMISSION ON SECONDARY SCHOOL REFORM

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Education reform over the past several decades has focused largely on the role of school-based efforts to improve student achievement, combined with attention to changes in state and federal policy designed to assist all students in achieving high standards. A notable gap in many school improvement initiatives has been careful examination of the role of the district in leading, or impeding, change. But clearly the district has a critical role to play. This paper and its references summarize the literature on the district role, with particular attention to how the district can become an effective force for improving student performance. It ends with highlights from leadership and management disciplines that are applicable to the school district's restructuring efforts.

All districts share the challenges of implementing high standards and raising achievement levels for all students. Often an overlooked component of school reform as attention (and drama) focuses on individual schools, the district can be a key element of support. Because they frequently set personnel, instructional and resource policies, districts may hold the ultimate power in turning rhetoric to reality. Effective districts have some common characteristics: they focus steadfastly on improving student achievement and raising standards, they become leaders in instructional improvement and professional development, they emphasize the use of data for decision-making, and they realign operations on all levels around common goals and superior service. Furthermore, to become leaders and enablers of school-level change, they need to focus on the process of leading change to build commitment and alignment across organizational boundaries.

Numerous studies cite the potential for the district central office to impede and stymie reform, due to excess rigidity, over-bureaucratization of work processes, internal politics, weak capacity and other factors that distance the district from providing much-needed support and assistance and effective collaboration with local schools, teachers and administrators. What then is the role of the district in education reform in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Several clear themes emerge from a review of the literature on the district role, and can be used to galvanize district management efforts. What do effective districts do?

- *Clear Transparent Focus on Student Achievement as the Bottom Line:* Effective districts seem to have a somewhat messianic quality to them that demonstrates unwavering commitment to improving student achievement and high expectations for all students. These districts set expectations for their schools, with supports, rewards and sanctions as incentives, and without prescriptively dictating how principals should run their schools and how teachers should run their classrooms.
- *Strong Emphasis on Instructional Support and Coherence:* Effective districts are instructional leaders. They assist with improvement efforts by helping to build and coordinate the capacity of schools and teachers for teaching and learning that boosts student achievement. A range of instructional support is critical, to provide consistency, to help



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schools determine the best options for meeting standards, and to help teachers perform to the best of their capacity.

- *Better Use of Data for Schools Needing Improvement and Target Assistance:* District leadership and influence can also be exerted through improved collection, analysis and use of data for decision-making and community-building. Districts work to examine data collection practices to ensure that data requested is used, useful and accurate, and that it reflects a wide range of indicators that can help inform practice. An important district role is not only to improve the validity and reliability of data collected, but equally important, to provide technical assistance in how to use data for management, instruction and curricular purposes.
- *Optimizing Human and Financial Resources:* Establishing a clear, standards-based vision, building instructional capacity, using data for decision-making, and providing consistent, coherent incentives across the system require attention to resource allocation, and in particular, to personnel and finance decisions. Transparency and delegation are the principles that should characterize financing decisions.
- *The Role of Centralization – Seeking a Delicate Balance:* A constant theme in analyses of district policy is that of centralization vs. decentralization, and an attendant lurch in practice from command-and-control centralized management to decentralized go-it-alone strategies. What is needed is a delicate balance that considers what makes sense to do across the system and what makes sense to decentralize.
- *Effective Community Involvement – Building Constituency for Reform:* The public and open nature of education, not managed well, can at its worst impede reform efforts. Clearly, careful attention from the outset to establishing open, credible processes for community and stakeholder involvement is critical to successful implementation.

From the literature about district leadership, combined with thinking about organizational change and leadership summarized above, district action should demonstrate and strive for:

- *Clarity of purpose:* The need for consistent, coordinated communications and guidance from district to schools, and a systematic process for seeking and managing feedback, is but one component of the need for the district to articulate and maintain a clear purpose regarding the results sought district-wide.
- *Alignment:* For a district to effectively lead change and support performance improvement in its schools, it must focus steadfastly on alignment. The administrative structure of a large school system is incredibly complex. Such complexity is not the issue – the congruency of goals, priorities and action is.
- *Shift from bureaucratic control to customer focus:* The business of the district must work well and be responsive to user needs. If not – if delays are endemic, customer satisfaction low or responsiveness questionable – aggressive steps need to be taken to change the mindset of these operations.
- *Understanding the change process:* Understanding the change process and how it affects the individual in different parts of the system is an important component of developing effective strategy. The district, and its relationship with local schools, should constitute a learning environment where trust and norms for collaboration on matters of professional substance are high. These are the environments that can embrace new practice.

In closing, we need a new concept of the district role, particularly for those with jurisdiction over poor performing schools. The district must become a leader in knowledge

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creation, building a collaborative environment and commitment to quality that permeates all functions. It cannot be scattered, piecemeal or weak, nor can it be overly controlling. Supporting collaboration is a very different mindset from promulgating regulations. Providing incentives and support for quality instruction requires a very different set of skills and organizational norms.



# THE ROLE OF THE DISTRICT IN DRIVING SCHOOL REFORM: A REVIEW FOR THE DENVER COMMISSION ON SECONDARY SCHOOL REFORM

## INTRODUCTION: THE TRADITIONAL DISTRICT

Traditionally, the central office picture has not been a pretty one. Education researchers, practitioners and policy makers have long lamented the inability of many school districts to effectively galvanize changes in educational performance across the communities in their jurisdiction. They point to examples of school-level transformation, but rarely district-wide innovation, while simultaneously warning about the difficulties inherent in replication. In fact, while the topic of replication of effective practice and “going to scale” is a popular one among education reform advocates, this is a quandary that continues to face policymakers as they attempt to determine how best to support a highly diverse and varied educational system.

The image of a moribund central office – staffed by well-intended functionaries who issue a plethora of uncoordinated and often contradictory directives, and preside over resource allocation, staffing and other critical decisions – captures the stereotypical rhetoric. Analysts have documented some of the problems with district behavior, and one need only read the daily newspaper in some large urban districts to note that there might be significant opportunities to revitalize and rethink the manner in which the district performs its functions. According to this viewpoint, bureaucracy abounds, with attendant inefficiencies in both operating processes such as human resources, purchasing, facilities and information technology, as well as in ability to launch focused, coherent instructional interventions.

The combination of a highly politicized environment, clamor for rapid change, multiple constituencies with often-conflicting voices and interests, coupled with long-standing organizational mores, attitudes, behaviors and relationships can often lead to more inertia and frustration than progress. Numerous studies also cite the potential for the district central office to constrain and stymie reform, due to excess rigidity, over-bureaucratization of work processes, internal politics, weak capacity and other factors that distance the district from providing much-needed support and assistance and effective collaboration with local schools, teachers and administrators. These barriers may be particularly acute in urban areas (Murphy 1990; Anyon 1997; Galvin 2000), which also are faced with difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers and administrators (Hess 1999; Hill, Campbell et al. 2000), derelict facilities, rigid central administrations, and a proclivity for the “initiative du jour” (Anyon 1997).

Simply put, many districts have historically not been well suited to play a significant role in raising student achievement (Chubb and Moe 1990), hence the lack of focus on the district in the education literature, with perhaps the exception of the role of superintendent in isolation (Seashore-Lewis 1989; Fullan 1991; Galvin 2000; Steineger and Sherman 2001; Jofus 2002). The combination of conflicting demands, multiple constituencies, crisis management, federal and state mandates and the myriad other demands on district administration have contributed to the



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difficulty faced by many districts in leading innovation. The frustrations inherent in this role have shaped how district staff view their ability to contribute, and over time, have driven in many instances an orientation and mentality for compliance rather than innovation and excellence. The combined pressure often results in an inclination to take the actions that are the easiest to implement, but may have minimal sustained impact (Hess 1999) – a tendency to employ short-term bureaucratic remedies to solve long-standing problems (Ouchi, Cooper et al. 2003).

MDRC’s case studies for the Cross City Campaign (Snipes, Doolittle et al. 2002) capture the challenges facing urban districts:

- Unsatisfactory academic achievement
- Political conflict
- Inexperienced teaching staff
- Low expectations and lack of demanding curriculum
- Lack of instructional coherence
- High student mobility
- Unsatisfactory business operations

Many efforts to engage districts in reform have focused on single aspects of school improvement. Some models have focused on a resource-provision role, others on personnel practices, and others on technical assistance. But the result seems to be piecemeal at best. Challenges to implementation, including misaligned district organizational structures, evaluation policies focused on compliance rather than classroom level improvement, resistance from many stakeholder groups to changing long-standing policies, and difficulties in redistributing staff combine to impede progress (Committee on Increasing High School Students Engagement and Motivation to Learn 2004).

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University has made a considerable investment in better understanding the role of the district and its potential for contributing to school improvement. Echoing the finding that most efforts since the 1980s have focused on federal, state and local level interventions, Annenberg points to the potential of the district to do harm or to play a key role in integrating, implementing and rationalizing often contradictory reforms. Because the district in most places controls the flow of funds, classifies students, assigns and hires teachers, and sets work rules, its ability to drive reform can be considerable. But this potential is infrequently realized. Historically, it has been district administrators who are responsible for organizing schools and setting priorities, with little discretion provided to site staff and teachers. Despite this fact, districts are, in the view of the Annenberg project, a more promising venue than state or individual schools for sustaining equitable improvement (Annenberg Institute for School Reform 2000-04).

## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE – THE NEW DISTRICT**

What then, is the role of the district in education reform in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? History may provide little guidance. The pressures of school reform, improving opportunity and raising standards for all students, combined with very real changes in underlying

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political, economic and social realities, elevate the importance of the district but provide little experience upon which to base these newfound responsibilities. A recent National Academy of Sciences study states that “district involvement becomes more critical in high school reform than in elementary- or middle-school reform” (Committee on Increasing High School Students Engagement and Motivation to Learn 2004).

Fortunately, there is a strong emerging literature about the role of the district in school reform. It is notable for the large degree of consensus regarding the primary functions of district leadership and administration. It is also notable for its relative paucity of “how-to” guidance for leaders interested in incorporating those reform principles. Districts must, in this complex and rapidly changing environment, play a strong supporting role, act as gatekeepers and capacity builders and encourage school-based decision-making (Massell 2000). There also seem to be strong voices for decentralization to the school level, allowing each school to select its own strategy with district support for those decisions (Ouchi 2003), within a framework of clear expectations for results.

Researchers have identified multiple frameworks for describing the district role. These have some striking similarities, and also a few notable differences. According to the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory (Steineger and Sherman 2001), there are three distinct roles of the district, regardless of the degree of centralization or reform approach:

- Set expectations with schools about standards.
- Support schools with the time and resources to meet those expectations.
- Establish clear accountability mechanisms.

Directing funds to initiatives specifically related to raising standards is one way administrators can demonstrate commitment to this agenda. Schools should be provided a great deal of leeway and flexibility in determining how to meet standards. Schools’ strategies will and should differ. There are numerous district means of improving performance, including efforts to:

- Make extra staff and resources available for poor performing schools.
- Create special offices, teams or units to provide technical assistance.
- Provide coaches and consulting support to design and deliver professional development for teachers.
- Team staff from high performing schools with low performing schools for mentoring.
- Create intervention teams in four areas: school organization and management; culture and climate; curriculum and instruction; and parental involvement.

Many other levers exist as well. The challenge is ensuring that they are aligned toward common goals and mutually supporting, not stand-alone independent initiatives. Diane Massell at the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) has found four elements that characterize successful districts. They align curriculum and instruction, in essence providing consistent leadership regarding teaching and learning practice. They build teacher knowledge and skills through reorganizing and restructuring professional development opportunities. They interpret test results to concretely support teaching, and they target low performing schools with additional services and assistance (Massell 2000).

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The Annenberg Institute for School Reform’s district redesign initiative has focused on the changing role of districts from administrative entities that dictate policy and procedure to entities that support schools in providing high quality education for all students. Their District Redesign Framework proposes seven supports for sustainable improvement:

- High standards and expectations for students, a shared philosophy about learning, and the authority to make decisions and enact reforms, including hiring staff who endorse the school’s philosophy.
- A pool of well-qualified teachers and administrators to draw from.
- Incentives to participate in, and ready access to, high quality professional development, curriculum support and guidance, and technical assistance.
- Respectful and trusting relationships among school staff, students, parents and community members.
- A mechanism for monitoring school progress in terms of equity, student achievement and other student outcomes compared with other schools.
- Access to economies of scale to help schools use their resources responsibly and efficiently.
- Substantive parent and community involvement. (Annenberg Institute for School Reform 2000-04).

These elements resulted from the Annenberg National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts, a five-year effort called School Communities that Work. The Annenberg effort goes on to call for “smart” districts that work for results and equity by focusing on three functions: providing schools, students and teachers with needed support and timely interventions; ensuring that schools have the power and resources to make good decisions; and making decisions and holding people throughout the system accountable with indicators of school and district performance and practice. The initiative has created three design groups: (1) Building Capacity for Quality Teaching and Leadership, (2) Developing Family and Community Supports, and (3) Organizing, Managing and Governing Schools, each of which is developing tools and working with individual districts on reform initiatives. Recent products of these groups include “Generally Accepted Principles of Teaching and Learning” guidance, and a “Central Office Review for Results and Equity” questionnaire. These tools are quite general, proposing generic processes for convening groups to analyze and address the issue. The current phase of the Annenberg initiative is providing site-based support to a number of urban districts, and is a good resource for districts to monitor as they seek to improve their own performance.

Clearly one of the critical common themes that characterize effective districts is the ability to push improved achievement and build capacity for high quality instruction. Why doesn’t this happen more often? The competencies of a successful district may not be well aligned with current capability. For example, achieving the characteristics defined in the Annenberg framework above will be stymied by weak recruitment and retention; inequitable allocation of high quality teachers; poor, inappropriate or fragmented development; mediocre central office capacity and skills; and absence of accountability measures. Even more simply put, many analysts in addition to Annenberg have found the most significant weakness of many districts to be a lack of instructional focus and expertise. Pew, CPRE and several others support this finding, that the role of the central office is most effective when focused on improving

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instruction (Corbett and Wilson 1991), and that it is a role that districts may not be currently well equipped to play. When widespread changes in instruction occur, it is due to clear, consistent and repeated instructional expectations, consistent professional development and modification to the priorities, organization and resource allocation to schools (David and Shields 2001).

Review of Talent Development model schools and other studies by the Center for Education of Students Placed at Risk found elements of success very similar to other frameworks (MacIver and Balfanz 1998; MacIver and Farley 2003). Provision of ongoing access to professional development, identification of schools in need, provision of sustained organizational assistance, and improved use of data were among the contributors to improved performance. The Council for Great City Schools and other observers identify similar themes as critical to successful district leadership – building a foundation for school reform, developing instructional coherence and making data-driven decisions (Spillane and Thompson 1997; Snipes, Doolittle et al. 2002). Learning First Alliance’s recent *Beyond Islands of Excellence* study of district behavior identified key components of successful districts. Again, some familiar themes are reinforced. Successful districts:

- Have the courage to acknowledge poor performance and the will to seek effective solutions.
- Recognize that to change, they have to focus more on coordination and improving instruction.
- Embrace major shifts in their approach to professional development.
- Base decisions on data and use multiple measures to assess performance.
- Recognize the importance of community engagement.
- Recognize there will be no quick fixes (Togneri and Anderson 2003).

The MDRC case studies commissioned by the Council for the Great City Schools (Snipes, Doolittle et al. 2002) found poor performing districts demonstrated: no consensus regarding reform efforts; a lack of goals, standards and consequences for poor performance; little or no district-level responsibility for improving instruction; disconnected and weak central office policies and practices; and multiple, conflicting directions and expectations. Note that these shortfalls tend to be failures of management, organization and operations more than pedagogy or educational model. The successful districts, as defined by sustained improvement in student achievement, demonstrated the same characteristics as the successful districts noted in other studies. Shared and explicit priorities and goals, clear and appropriate expectations and roles, support for improvement methods, and focus on use of data were among the characteristics of success – elements that characterize highly performing organizations in every sector.

As is evident above, several clear themes emerge and can be used to galvanize district management efforts. The most important and most consistent was that the focus of the central office should be on improving instruction and raising standards and achievement. This has not always been the typical domain of central offices and central office tasks. To effectively contribute to efforts to improve student achievement district-wide, district administrators and central office personnel should organize their work around three primary themes:

- Clear transparent focus on student achievement as the bottom line.
- Strong emphasis on instructional support and coherence.

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- Better use of data for decision-making, to identify schools in need of improvement and to target resources.

Tactically and organizationally, changes need to follow to ensure consistency with these goals. Personnel and administrative decisions, financing and community involvement all need to build toward a common vision and purpose.

### *Clear Transparent Focus on Student Achievement as the Bottom Line*

Effective districts seem to have a somewhat messianic quality to them that demonstrates unwavering commitment to improving student achievement and high expectations for all students. These districts set expectations for the schools under their purview, with supports, rewards and sanctions as incentives, and without prescriptively dictating how principals should run their schools and how teachers should run their classrooms. Rather, the goal is made very transparent and clear in terms of the expected standard of achievement. Within this overall context of expectation regarding end result, other initiatives are developed.

There is widespread agreement that the role of the district is to provide clear strategic context, guidance and enabling resources – in intellectual support, time, financing, personnel and other areas. It then becomes incumbent on district personnel to map decision-making processes, policies, procedures and other district activities to this overall strategic direction.

### *Strong Emphasis on Instructional Support and Coherence*

Effective districts are instructional leaders. They assist with improvement efforts by helping build and coordinate the capacity of schools and teachers for teaching and learning that boosts student achievement. The Cambridge Public Schools, for example, recognized the importance of instructional leadership and support for their reform efforts. The district created a high level position (Deputy Superintendent for Instruction) and an integrated instructional division to bolster district capacity in this domain (Spence 2002). A range of instructional support is critical to provide consistency, to help schools determine the best options for meeting standards, and to help teachers perform to the best of their capacity. It is a concept of providing guidance and leadership in areas where there can be synergy and benefit from a degree of centralized analysis and support, instead of having every school and classroom duplicate efforts in investigating options for improving performance. The degree of district involvement necessarily varies depending on the capacity of individual schools.

Coordinated, focused and cohesive investment in and delivery of teacher development is a critical component of the district effort to lead instructional excellence. Again, the concept is one of local control within a framework provided by the district that sets priorities. New York City's District Two is an example of a district reform effort that focused on major investment in teacher professional development. It required strong leadership, examination of the networks and structures that provide existing professional development and willingness to challenge them, and stable resources to ensure follow through and continuity.

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In building their capacity to be instructional leaders, district administrators need to recognize that traditional structures and systems may not support this role. For example, redistributing funding from existing professional development efforts, finding collaborative time and setting district-wide teacher development goals all require systematic changes to well established habits and practices (Togneri and Anderson 2003).

In sum, the district needs to: consider what it would require to exert greater influence in instruction; identify what constitutes best practice; identify and make available tools and examples to administrators and teachers; and reorganize instructional support mechanisms. If the district can reorient its efforts in one area, this is where the emphasis should be placed.

### *Better Use of Data for Schools Needing Improvement and Target Assistance*

District leadership and influence can also be exerted through improved collection, analysis and use of data for decision-making and community-building. Districts should examine data collection practices to ensure that data requested is used, useful and accurate, and that it reflects a wide range of indicators that can help inform practice. Similarly, disaggregation is important. A key district role is not only to improve the validity and reliability of data collected, but equally important, to provide technical assistance in how to use data for management, instruction and curricular purposes.

Armed with a bevy of good data about student performance, teacher quality, demographics and other metrics, the district can then assess local needs. A transparent process for identifying schools in need of improvement is the desired result. Having identified schools in need of improvement, and working with school-based personnel to develop an understanding of where intervention is required, districts can target assistance efforts. Data also informs district ability to reward and sanction performance.

CPRE notes that efforts to use data are hampered by inadequate research, conflicting findings and distractions from critical issues (Corcoran, Fuhrman et al. 2001). This is a major issue, and the proliferation of calls for more data often in more detail can actually stymie efforts to improve data-based analysis and decisions.

### *Optimizing Human and Financial Resources*

Establishing a clear, standards-based vision, building instructional capacity, using data for decision-making and providing consistent, coherent incentives across the system require attention to resource allocation, and in particular, to personnel and finance decisions. The Annenberg District Reform effort has developed a human resources framework and emphasizes the importance of capacity building across the district and schools. Recruiting, retention and development of high quality personnel at all levels needs to be a significant focus of district leadership. Ensuring the personnel processes function well, allow for local autonomy according to consistent standards of quality, and encourage innovation and creativity is a major challenge for many large bureaucracies. Dr. William Ouchi and others make the point that principals

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should make their own hiring decisions, within guidelines established by the district (Annenberg Institute for School Reform 2000-04; Ouchi 2003).

Transparency and delegation are the principles that should characterize financing decisions. Again, reflecting Annenberg and Ouchi's work, which is supported by others, principals need to understand and control budgets for their staff and programs. A student-based or weighted budgeting formula can be a key building block in establishing some financial transparency, an improved understanding of where resources exist and how they can be reallocated and better used.

### *The Role of Centralization – Seeking a Delicate Balance*

A constant theme in analyses of district policy is that of centralization vs. decentralization, and the attendant lurch in practice from command-and-control centralized management to decentralized go-it-alone strategies. It appears that neither works consistently. Rather, what is needed is a delicate balance that considers what makes sense to do across the system and what makes sense to decentralize. Local control and autonomy is extremely important to ensuring accountability and providing incentives for improved performance. At the same time, providing a policy context, expertise, guidance and support is a critical role of the district. Districts must recognize and support the variability across the institutions under their purview (and within schools as well). Those with limited capacity are at a clear disadvantage, and districts should seek non-punitive means of supporting capacity development there.

Michael Fullan is among those who raise the limits of both centralization and decentralization (Fullan 1992; Marsh 2000). The organizational model, balancing central control with school autonomy, providing focus and incentives for improvement, requires changing many aspects of district operations.

### *Effective Community Involvement – Building Constituency for Reform*

The public and open nature of education, not managed well, can at its worst impede reform efforts. Careful attention from the outset to establishing open, credible processes for community and stakeholder involvement is critical to successful implementation. The Annenberg School Communities that Work initiative has placed particular emphasis on building strong relationships with community stakeholders. In *A District Leader's Guide to Relationships that Support Systemic Change* (National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts 2003), the key elements of building relationships with external organizations in support of education reform are delineated. Rather than referring to these organizations as intermediaries, Annenberg has coined the term *reform support organization* or RSO. Analysis of RSO-district relationships found trust to be the most important factor in sustaining strong and supportive collaboration. Distinction is drawn between local and external partners, and the advantages of each type of relationship noted.

## **THE MANAGEMENT CHALLENGE**

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Ouchi, Fullan and others' findings regarding management and leading change mirror the business management and leadership literature of the past several decades. In fact, the education field has been a late adopter of the thinking that has characterized management reform in business and subsequently government. Rather than a challenge of educational pedagogy and policy, achieving results is more a reflection of ability to align behavior and resources over time toward a common purpose. Does the district have the capacity, knowledge and understanding to make the kinds of changes necessary to emulate the elements of effective districts described above? What is possible, rather than, in the words of Paul Hill, just "wishful thinking" (Hill, Campbell et al. 2000)? Furthermore, what are our underlying assumptions regarding how organizations change? What's in it for me – the teacher, administrator, analyst, staff person who is going to be asked to think and do differently? Districts must move from "administrative blob" (Brewer 1996) to leaders of change, a significant reorientation in process, behavior and mindset.

There is no silver bullet. The cult of the powerful charismatic leader, of the outside model, of *an* answer needs debunking. Similarly, it is important to recognize the power of inertia and the difficulty of leading lasting change. It is rare for institutions and systems that have developed over decades to easily transform themselves, and matters are further complicated by the fact that power can frequently reside in those who do not want to change. Reform efforts get derailed with disturbing frequency. The loss of the leader, who moves on to the next challenge, undermines resolve as new leadership comes in to make its own mark. Over time, loss of nerve and political resistance, failure to sustain expected financial support, temporary delays, partial implementation and the rise of competing initiatives further complicate matters (Hill, Campbell et al. 2000). Unfortunately, it seems that few if any of the high visibility reforms promised really altered control or lasting practice at the school level. As in the management reform and business literature, making sense of what really works is an elusive art (Micklethwait and Woolridge 1996). When district leadership is unstable, when distrust erodes the relationship between central office and schools, when there is limited autonomy at the school level and when resources are too scarce (or at least very difficult to redistribute), the school improvement challenge is even greater (Bodilly 1998).

Most worrisome is a not atypical study that found little evidence that central office personnel understand innovation or its implementation or have the ability to be instructional leaders (Bogotch and Brooks 1994; Bogotch, MacPhee et al. 1995). Districts have limited effect on school-based innovations and work seems to be largely procedural, characterized by a proliferation of unrelated job responsibilities. The study for Cambridge asserted that if business processes do not work, it is impossible to focus on the business of education – because the basics of high performing organizations are not there (Spence 2002). In short, linking school innovation with central office leadership found that the central office overall did not demonstrate the level of reorientation needed for system restructuring. This is the challenge – central office administrators may not have the understanding of conceptual ideas that research says they need – they have other strengths required to run a district.

Ouchi, in *Making Schools Work: A Revolutionary Plan to Get Your Children the Education They Need*, captures the idea that district management (or lack thereof) is the fundamental impediment to lasting reform. He posits several principles that in his analysis



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characterize high performing districts. These concepts, implemented consistently and concurrently, appear in his estimation to contribute to schools' abilities to improve student achievement and to districts' abilities to support those changes. Ouchi's core themes are:

1. Every principal is an entrepreneur.
2. Every school controls its own budget.
3. Everyone is accountable for student performance and budgets.
4. Everyone delegates authority to those below.
5. There is a burning focus on student achievement.
6. Every school is a community of learners.
7. Families have real choice among a variety of unique schools (Ouchi 2003).

Relatively consistent with the other findings regarding district role discussed above, they also emphasize the importance of a shared and clear commitment to student achievement, a redistribution of decision-making to balance centralization and decentralization, recognition of community and stakeholder roles, and re-examination of the resource allocation process. What Ouchi's analysis appears to place less emphasis on is the importance of the district in providing instructional leadership and professional development, in addition to responsibility for failing schools. It also puts less of an emphasis on data-based decision-making than other constructs. It is important, however, because it makes very clear that the answer is in front of us – more a matter of building systems capacity and organizing well than of selecting the right model.

There is a massive volume of literature on leadership and management. For the purposes of this inquiry, there are several in particular that contribute to the discussion below, and that can inform district thinking about reform. These include the work of James Collins about organizational excellence and sustainability, and the practices of successful companies, most notably in *Built to Last and Good to Great* (Collins and Porras 1994; Collins 2001). Their observations regarding clear purpose, big goals and “getting the right people on the bus” are especially valuable in an educational reform context. Alignment is a major theme, because people look for consistency in behavior and coherency in message.

Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal's work, *Reframing Organizations*, is a useful perspective to help district leadership understand the many frames that apply to organizational behavior and the need to be thinking about and acting on multiple levels (Bolman and Deal 1997). Getting structure, human resources, politics and culture/symbols right simultaneously is the way to achieve lasting results. This method of organizational inquiry is particularly useful given the complex operating environment of a school district and the need to make changes on multiple levels to ensure results. Richard Whiteley's work about customer service and creating a customer focused organization is a critical aspect of organizational transformation (Whiteley 1991). Particularly applicable to district business functions, the idea of service excellence must pervade the manner in which personnel, finance, facilities, contracts and other district functions are performed. These are not matters of districts controlling schools, but rather of providing high quality service to them. School satisfaction with district services should be measured and then rewarded and sanctioned as appropriate. The focus on service should also drive a hard-nosed look at what functions the district really needs to perform centrally and what can be delegated to local schools. If districts can't get their business functions right – that is, timely, responsive,



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cost-effective and high quality – they will have even greater difficulty exerting intellectual leadership in instruction and curricula.

Finally, John Kotter’s work about leading change is particularly useful to district leaders. His “eight steps to transforming your organization” make clear the importance of building organizational capacity around a common purpose, empowerment and incremental results (Kotter 1995; Kotter 1996).

<b>Eight Steps to Transforming Your Organization</b>
<b>Establishing a Sense of Urgency</b>
<b>Forming a Powerful Guiding Coalition</b>
<b>Creating a Vision</b>
<b>Communicating the Vision</b>
<b>Empowering Others to Act on the Vision</b>
<b>Planning for and Creating Short-Term Wins</b>
<b>Consolidating Improvements and Producing Still More Change</b>
<b>Institutionalizing New Approaches</b>
<b>(Kotter 1996)</b>

From the literature about district leadership, combined with thinking about organizational change and leadership summarized above, district action should demonstrate and strive for four things: clarity of purpose, alignment, a shift from bureaucratic control to customer focus and an understanding of the change process.

### Clarity of Purpose

How many directives emanated from the district office in the past year? Are they part of a coordinated effort to assist schools? Are recipients’ needs considered when developing such communications? The need for consistent, coordinated communications and guidance from district to schools, and a systematic process for seeking and managing feedback, is but one component of the need for the district to articulate and maintain a clear purpose regarding the results sought district-wide. Assuming that focus will be on raising student achievement, resulting actions must then be assessed according to whether they support that purpose or not. Leadership coherence and clarity is a critical component of lasting change.

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## Alignment

Rhetoric without consequences is an empty promise. Inconsistent behavior can go further to undermine a goal than no action at all. For a district to effectively lead change and support performance improvement in its schools, it must focus steadfastly on alignment. This means making sure what everyone does day-to-day is consistent with and not counter to the stated goal. It means looking at incentives – both rewards and sanctions – to ensure they support the overall goal of improving student achievement. Does data collection and assessment focus on the right places? Are professional development efforts designed to address the most significant needs? Are district behaviors consistent with rhetoric about local decision-making?

Clearly the administrative structure of a large school system is incredibly complex. Such complexity is not the issue – the congruency of goals and priorities is. Building participatory processes that are sensitive to local needs is a means of improving alignment across the system. Listening to detractors and finding ways to help them buy-in to changes is an important tactic as well. An examination of human resources, financial and budgetary policies, and all the practices across the system to find ways of building consistency in thought and action is an important role for district personnel.

## Shift from Bureaucratic Control to Customer Focus

The pendulum swings from centralization to decentralization. Regardless, services must be of high quality. The business must work and be responsive to user needs. If not – if delays are endemic, customer satisfaction low and responsiveness questionable – aggressive steps need to be taken to change the mindset of these operations. Satisfaction surveys and clear process goals about turnaround time and quality are a way to begin to raise expectations regarding the provision of basic services.

## Understanding the Change Process

The status quo in American education is an impressively powerful force for a variety of reasons. Combined with what some have characterized as faddish swings from one new initiative to the next, it is not surprising that change is elusive to the best of leaders and practitioners. Understanding the change process and how it affects the individual in different parts of the system is an important component of developing effective strategy.

It may be useful to think conceptually about the levers available to district administrators. Common sense and research both seem to indicate that in a governance structure as decentralized and multifaceted as the average school district, mandating change is a dubious proposition at best. However, policymakers and practitioners seem divided between those who feel that “top down” does not work, and those who think that it does. Certainly mandates from the federal, state and district levels can change local behavior. The question remains whether such an approach is the most effective tool to change practice. Most theorists and practitioners argue that a combination of incentives (and disincentives) and capacity-building efforts are the most effective means of sustained change.



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Fullan has written extensively about leading in a culture of change – understanding the change process, cultivating relationships and establishing context for improvement initiatives, as well as thinking systemically rather than in terms of independent projects (Fullan 2001; Fullan 2004). The preconditions for reform must be created. The district, and its relationship with local schools, should constitute a learning environment where trust and norms for collaboration on matters of professional substance are high. These are the environments that can embrace new practice.

In closing, we need a new concept of the district role, particularly for those with jurisdiction over poor performing schools. The district must become the leader in knowledge creation, building a collaborative environment and commitment to quality that permeates all functions. It cannot be scattered, piecemeal or weak, nor can it be overly controlling. Supporting collaboration is a very different mindset from promulgating regulations. Providing incentives and support for quality instruction requires a very different set of skills and organizational norms.

## **PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS**

There are three parts to the analysis above – the traditional district role, possibilities for new district behaviors, and lessons in organizational management and behavior. Together, these should provide some clear ideas for Denver officials as they consider options for district reform. It is likely that there are aspects of district operations that fit the stereotype of the remote, rule-bound central office, and it is equally likely that there are examples of strong leadership and support for school-level improvement. There is a need for some data collection and analysis of district behavior to identify specific needs and priorities, determining where change can be easily accomplished and where more sustained effort will be necessary. Effectively managing participation will be an important element of this leadership to ensure that key constituencies – including district officials and staff, teachers, administrators, parents and community members – are involved at appropriate junctures. Among the actions to consider:

- *Leading Change Action Planning:* District leadership needs a roadmap for its efforts to lead changes in district behavior. Some of the components of that effort are summarized below. A small design team – convened to provide executive direction to overall district transformation, ensure appropriate participation throughout the process, set expectations and monitor progress – should coordinate and lead the effort. An organizational self-assessment, using some of the criteria of the Baldrige award application or ISO certification, could be another useful tool to help organize improvement efforts.
- *Clear Goal:* The envisioned role of the district and its relationship with schools should be articulated and used to drive the work to improve district operations. This vision should have two components – one tied to student performance and achievement of state standards (what), and a second tied to service excellence and district support for schools (how).
- *Creation of Performance Improvement/Redesign Teams:* Performance improvement/redesign teams should be chartered to develop action plans and begin implementation in several key areas, such as: instructional leadership and development,



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customer service and performance excellence, guidance and technical support, and organizational structure and alignment.

- *Data Analysis of School Performance:* The district should examine available data regarding school, student and teacher performance to ensure it is timely, useful and used. A significant effort should be made to make transparent information about performance trends available for continuous improvement purposes.
- *Performance Review of District Operations:* An assessment of district operations should be conducted to identify opportunities to improve service delivery and customer satisfaction.
- *Analysis of Professional Development:* Information regarding professional development of teachers should be collected and analyzed to develop suggestions for greater consistency and coherence.
- *Examination of Human Resources and Budget Process:* Processes for recruitment, retention and assignment of personnel should be analyzed to raise quality, delegate authority and remove administrative barriers. Similarly, financial resource decisions and allocation processes should be made transparent and devolved to the school level to the degree possible.

These are a few of the steps that could be taken to begin to reorient district performance. This is an extremely complex undertaking, and one that will unfold over a significant period of time. As a result, it must possess an internal logic and ballast that makes sense to its participants and target audience regardless of bureaucratic turf or individual leadership. Significant changes in how decisions are made, how district personnel spend their time and many other aspects of district operations are likely. The potential, in terms of leveraging district resources to support student achievement, is considerable.

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