

A Delicate Balance:

District Policies and Classroom Practice

Chicago Case Study:

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Milwaukee Case Study:

Eric Osthoff and Paula White

Seattle Case Study:

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A Delicate Balance: District Policies and Classroom Practice

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Foreword

The Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform is a national network of school reformers who work to create high-quality public schools that ensure educational success for all urban young people. We advocate for sweeping policies and practices that move authority, resources, and accountability to the school level, reconnect schools with their communities, give voice to parents and students, and completely rethink the role of central office.

We currently focus our work in nine cities: Baltimore, Denver, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, Oakland, Philadelphia, and Seattle. Collectively our network is a vital force in the campaign for educational equity and excellence. The Cross City Campaign enables reform leaders from inside and outside school systems to share information, to mount collective advocacy efforts, and to create a national voice for urban students. We are advocates, teachers, principals, community

organizers, parents, students, central office administrators, policy analysts, researchers, union officials, and funders. We provide leadership-development training and technical assistance, produce research-driven publications and practical tools, connect reformers through cross-site visits and national meetings, and build local and national constituencies to advance reform efforts.

Since our inception in 1993, the Cross City Campaign has been a leader in promoting and writing about urban district redesign. The fundamental question driving this work has been, “What is the role of the central office in improving instruction?” Our first publication, *Reinventing Central Office: A Primer for Successful Schools*, made a strong case for rethinking district functions and recommended a dramatic revision of urban public school systems, one that shifted most of the funds and authority to the schools and dismantled centralized, bureaucratic structures. A number of years later, as our vision of the district’s role in supporting schools evolved, we published *Changing Rules and Roles: A Primer on School-Based Decision Making*. In this publication, Angus McBeath, the superintendent of the Edmonton Public Schools (Alberta, Canada), described how his district created a radically different role for the central office. We learned from Edmonton how an urban district, with a strong center and an unwavering focus on student achievement, could empower principals and teachers and redesign the central office to support their work.

To further our understanding of the district’s role in instructional reform, we directed a qualitative study in 2000-2003 that examined the role and importance of district/school interactions in the implementation of local instructional improvement. The three districts we studied, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Seattle, already had promising systemic reform initiatives underway as well as experience in decentralizing authority and resources to schools. (See Appendix B for city demographics.) The multi-year research project was led by Dr. Patricia Burch (primary investigator) and Dr. James Spillane (project consultant) and was directed by the Cross City Campaign.

The first report from this study, *Leading From The Middle: Mid-Level District Staff and Instructional Improvement*, was published in August, 2004. Since its publication, *Leading from the Middle* has been an important tool in helping school and district staff, policy makers, researchers, and reform advocates think differently about the role of the district in instructional improvement. *A Delicate Balance: District Policies and Classroom Practice*, the second report in this series, moves the conversation to a deeper level by providing case studies that take an in-depth look at the challenges that these three urban districts faced as they attempted large-scale instructional reform. The case studies illustrate the demands on school systems as they balance central support and pressure, district mandates and school autonomy, and large-scale instructional reforms and school practices.

Leading From The Middle: Mid-Level District Staff and Instructional Improvement

Leading from the Middle looked at the ground that many people lump together as “the bureaucracy.” While not glamorous, it is important territory that is home to an army of administrators — program managers, content-area directors, budget specialists, and more — who have a significant impact on how district instructional initiatives are understood and acted upon by school leaders. After superintendents and school boards establish new policies, mid-level staff have the job of translating big ideas like “improving literacy district-wide” or “closing the achievement gap” into strategies, guidelines, and procedures that are “handed down” to schools. In this report, we argue that mid-level administrators who bring school people to the table to pool their expertise and then translate this collective expertise into strategies, guidelines, tools, and procedures are more likely to be successful in moving policies into classroom practice.

The most promising work we studied came from a commitment to collaboration from people who

saw school staff not just as targets of policy change but as substantive sources of expertise who could help the district understand what people in schools were experiencing. Unfortunately, the prevailing orientation that central office staff brought to their work with schools was authoritative, not collaborative.

In our report, we urge superintendents and school boards to take the first steps toward substantially changing the way their mid-level managers work with schools by:

- Reorganizing mid-level staffs’ work so they could spend more time in the schools.
- Increasing the skills and knowledge of mid-level staff around teaching and learning.
- Drawing on the enormous expertise of principals and teachers in the design of new reform policies and implementation strategies.
- Minimizing interruptions that distract school and central office staff from focusing on instruction.

Executive Summary

“I don’t have any quarrel with the way it’s organized at the central office. I see a lack of quality and commitment for the right things. See, I see everything in terms of delivering instruction and making learning happen. And the further we get from my classroom, the less I see that they maintain that idea...”

—Teacher

Since 1993, the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform has been examining the role of central office and its relationship to schools. In 2000 we embarked on a three-year qualitative study in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Seattle that examined the role

and importance of district/school interactions in the implementation of instructional improvement initiatives. Then in August 2004 we released our first report from this research, *Leading From the Middle: Mid-Level District Staff and Instructional Improvement*, which looked at the important leadership role that mid-level central office staff can play in implementing district reforms. The three case studies in this report examine district policies and initiatives and give voice to the *school* perspective.

The three districts we studied had decentralized resources and authority to the schools in different ways and had undergone significant

organizational changes to facilitate their ambitious instructional improvement plans. The unfortunate reality for the many principals and teachers we interviewed is that the districts were unable to change and improve practice on a large scale. And the evidence is indisputable: you can’t improve student learning without improving instruction.

The three districts had all formulated their grand district-wide visions, ostensibly focused on improving instruction. But the districts largely failed to communicate and translate their “big ideas” into improved instruction because their tools and mandates were not informed by school level expertise and were not accompanied by the kind of support and capacity building necessary to change instruction.

These case studies raise fundamental issues that resonate across these three different districts and highlight where the opportunities for success or failure lay. The Cross City Campaign believes that when principals and teachers are not integral in driving the policy agenda and are not provided with adequate resources and support, big initiatives announced with much fanfare will be impotent at best and, at worst, will make it more difficult for schools to provide quality instruction.



Introduction

The Chicago, Milwaukee, and Seattle school districts have pursued a number of reforms in recent decades, many of them in response to significant demographic and social shifts in their student populations: busing to achieve desegregation; the creation of magnet and specialty schools; the provision of choice opportunities through charter schools and vouchers; and a return to neighborhood schools. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, each district began to decentralize authority and resources to the school site. As site-based management became institutionalized, the standards movement and the expansion of state and federal influence over schools, culminating in the *No Child Left Behind* act of 2001, created pressure on the districts to transform themselves into agents of instructional reform. School leaders faced the

seemingly paradoxical challenge of maintaining their autonomy to craft programs and align resources to meet the needs of their students and, at the same time, respond to increasing district pressure and control to improve student learning as measured by standardized tests.

During the time of our research, each of these school districts was on the front end of pursuing an approach to system-wide instructional improvement that was linked to standards-based reform. While the three districts had much in common, each pursued the goal of helping their diverse student populations achieve high academic standards through a unique set of district-wide policies. In the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), emphasis on high-stakes accountability remained paramount even as the district transitioned to incorporate a focus on content-based instruction. The Milwaukee Public Schools' (MPS) "education marketplace" strategy of enabling parental choice, reflected in its neighborhood schools initiative, elevated the goal of stemming enrollment decline through competition to the same level of importance as the educational goal of enabling students to achieve academically. The Seattle Public Schools (SPS) was engaged in an intense reform effort to become a standards-based district. This effort worked on many different fronts simultaneously to achieve

the district's dual goals of helping all students meet standards and eliminating the achievement gap between white students and students of color.

In the three cities, principals and teachers did not view the standards implementation policies and initiatives as directly linked to instruction. In Chicago, teachers typically interpreted standards-based practice in terms of consistency of curriculum coverage across classrooms and schools. One teacher noted, "There were a lot of inconsistencies within the school system in terms of exactly what type of instruction was being given to students. So it did make it easier once the Chicago Public Schools came up with a set of standards aligned with the state goals, and that they were published in a book so that the teachers clearly understood what they were expected to do." And as noted in Seattle, "The district policy assumed that teachers would know how to do this [translating standards into practice], while teachers looked to the district for direction." District policies for school transformation did not directly influence instruction, but were intended to guide schools to focus on improving teaching and learning. Milwaukee school staff believed that the standards were educationally sound and aligned well to state and national standards. However, the standards specified only content and did not address pedagogy.

In the three cities, principals and teachers did not view the standards implementation policies and initiatives as directly linked to instruction.

While the standards message was diffused, the message that teachers and principals heard most clearly from central office was that schools would be held accountable for student outcomes. The emphasis on standardized test scores was prevalent in all three districts. And while there was apparent acceptance by school staff that a strong emphasis on test-based accountability in the era of *No Child Left Behind* would remain, principals and teachers still expressed a sense of unfairness when discussing the pressures of accountability. Teachers and principals were calling for the central office to focus on student growth rather than status measures. Although Milwaukee teachers were committed to performance assessments, they realized that the administration was giving greater and greater value to standardized tests as a major part of their accountability system. A Chicago principal noted, “We are taking tests all the time. We know that we have to live with that throughout our lives. The emphasis on testing is one that I sometimes question because the day that the children have to take the test—it’s like a judgment day. We’re working with human beings. There are people that can test well. And there are people that cannot test well. In the work of a child, you have to look at the whole child.”

Over the years, changing district leadership and the resulting changes in district policies and practices resulted in a culture of skepticism

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and mistrust at many schools, especially among teachers. Teachers interviewed for our study typically felt disconnected from the decision-making that was bringing change to their classrooms. The predominance of one-way communication from the district to schools in Seattle limited opportunities for teachers and principals to have a voice in shaping district policies. As a result, school level perspectives differed significantly from those at the central office. As a Chicago teacher noted, “I really don’t think that enough

time and attention is given to what teachers think. Things are just thrown at us. I’d like to try some of these new techniques, but I want to know some results before I go on to the next thing”

Chicago and Seattle attempted to establish coherent, content-based professional development programs in place of previous programs that were fragmented across departments and topics with no consistent message. Both were attempting to link their professional development initiatives with their content-based instructional strategies. Toward the end of this study, the Chicago Public Schools had begun an aggressive effort to redesign professional development according to a set of research-based design principles and link it to its district-wide literacy initiative. Seattle’s professional development program was improving, but it lacked an overall strategy for integrating its offerings. On the other hand, in Milwaukee, the district was no longer delivering intensive professional development on a school-by-school basis, instead it was making schools shoulder the burden of procuring professional development services on their own.

Demands on principals’ time to respond to sometimes overwhelming central office requests, along with the time principals spent overseeing school operations, made it difficult for principals to focus on school instruction. The demands created a “dual focus” for principals in all three

districts where school leaders walked a thin line. They had to respond to external policy messages—improve teaching practice, increase student learning, raise test scores—while at the same time they were expected to craft instructional programs that addressed the unique learning needs, interests, and skill levels of their students, and create an instructional climate of support for teachers. As a result, principals had to hone their leadership skills in order to integrate multiple agendas to create coherence for their staff and to build school ownership of district-wide policies. Much of the time, this work was done with minimal central office support and resources.

Teacher leaders were also an important component in implementing district reform efforts. In Seattle, a number of teacher leaders who truly embraced the Transformation Plan effort emerged at several schools.¹ This leadership generated school ownership and a commitment to carry out the plan. In Milwaukee, school leadership was shared by principals, school level coordinators, resource teachers, and classroom teachers. Principals and teachers increased their collaboration as a way of meeting multiple expectations. Emphasis on a given actor varied at times throughout the year as central office demands to focus on one or another task changed. In Chicago, teachers also spoke of their dual responsibility to change the way they taught even while striving to help their students perform well on standardized tests.

The case studies of these decentralized school districts undertaking standards-based reforms illustrate the delicate balance needed between school-level autonomy, central guidance and direction, and shared responsibility for student learning.

External organizations were of varying importance in providing support to school staff in the three cities. The Seattle case study provides an interesting look at the importance of external leadership to principals and teachers. School staff overwhelmingly identified external partners as key players in reform, while central office staff were rarely mentioned. We found that those external funders were able to shape the direction of district reform by exposing leaders to new ideas. The expertise from external agents helped individual schools make sense of what were often perceived as vague, incomplete, and sometimes conflicting policy mandates. Whereas Seattle's external support came from outside agencies, Chicago's was more likely to come from a combination of central office staff and external partners (e.g. universities, reform

organizations), particularly for the schools on probation.² On the other hand, Milwaukee school staff rarely mentioned external partners. The general perception by MPS central office staff was that school staff, especially principals, had assumed a greater leadership role in all aspects of school operations, including instruction, and that local school capacity for instructional improvement had increased.

The following case studies provide a rich opportunity for policy makers, school practitioners, researchers, parents, and students to better understand what conditions need to be in place for instructional reforms to reach into schools and classrooms and contribute to meaningful changes in learning and instruction. The three case studies underscore changes needed in school organization to accommodate the work of teachers as they attempt to learn new practices to address their students' needs, interests, and abilities. They also make clear that school leaders need strong support in becoming instructional leaders. In so doing, a focus on instructional leadership casts a spotlight back on the central office and how it can most effectively support the development of instructional leadership system-wide. Finally, the case studies of these decentralized school districts undertaking standards-based reforms illustrate the delicate balance needed between school-level autonomy, central guidance and direction, and shared responsibility for student learning.

Lessons Learned

The lessons learned and recommendations we present below draw upon the large database collected during our three-year study of district and school interactions around instructional reform and complement the findings from our first report in this series, *Leading from the Middle: Mid-Level Central Office Staff and Instructional Improvement*.

■ District-wide instructional policies and mandates had little impact on improving classroom instruction.

Despite sweeping initiatives to improve student achievement, few district policies were able to improve teacher practice. Milwaukee teachers reported that district policies and tools, such as standards and curricular materials, had modest effects on instruction because the policies did not relate specifically to actual classroom practices. They felt the most specific district guidance was in operational areas, such as in creating neighborhood schools, rather than in instruction. Few Seattle policies were targeted directly at improving instruction and principals indicated that there was little substantive conversation from district administrators about teaching and learning. School level staff interpreted many district policies as shallow and uninformed because the central office staff did not really know the culture of their schools. The Chicago teachers in our study understood that the district's instructional programs were standards-based, but they equated standards with uniform content coverage across schools

and classrooms. They gave little indication that they understood that their teaching practice might need to change in a standards-based classroom.

■ The districts' rhetoric about improving instruction did not match the reality of their relentless focus on increasing standardized test scores.

In spite of superintendents' and central staff's rhetoric about improving classroom practice and transforming teaching and learning, their communications about meeting standards were defined by increased test scores, particularly in Chicago and Seattle. Chicago principals and teachers in low, middle, and high achieving schools all heard the central office's message loud and clear: the driving priority was increased test scores. Instructional goals were often talked about in terms of student outcomes or achievement levels as opposed to instructional quality. The Seattle school leaders in our study felt that if their test scores were good, no one cared if they were teaching to standards, utilizing the adopted curriculum, or using the classroom-based assessments. As one principal stated, "At the same time that they ask you to think out of the box, they are also becoming more and more prescriptive." Even in Milwaukee, where schools used multiple assessments to gauge overall student and school performance, standardized test scores played an increasingly important role in the competition for recruiting public school students and in meeting *No Child Left Behind* requirements.

■ Teacher voice and expertise were excluded from policy development and implementation discussions.

Teachers generally felt isolated from most discussions and decisions about instructional improvement that occurred outside their schools. Chicago teachers had few interactions with central office staff and learned about district policies through their principals, through centrally created instructional materials or tools, or through large, district-sponsored meetings. As one teacher stated, "My interaction is zero. No one from any place higher than this building has been in my classroom or anything. I've never talked to anyone." Milwaukee classroom teachers rarely saw central office personnel. Some teachers served on district committees that sought feedback on the implementation of district policies that were already formulated. Seattle school staff noted that they had little or no input into the design of important policy instruments, limiting the school's opportunity to have a voice in shaping district policies. Consequently, school views differed considerably from those at the central office.

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■ **The districts failed to provide the kind of support and capacity building that school staff needed to achieve the districts' ambitious goals.**

School leaders faced the daunting challenge of implementing large-scale reforms without having the comprehensive infrastructure needed to support new skills and knowledge development. In Seattle, the district tended to overestimate individual schools' capacity to make sense of guidelines and their ability to design programs that might lead to improvements in teaching and learning. Without adequate professional development and the resources to address instructional needs, schools saw the district's demands for accountability as unfunded mandates. The Milwaukee central office had limited central control of curriculum and instruction and held principals primarily responsible for teacher support. District staff paraphrased the superintendent as having said, "Give me 160 excellent principals and I'll give you a great district." This sentiment demonstrated the kind of relationship many central office leaders envisioned between schools and central office. The Chicago principals in probationary schools received considerable support from central office and appreciated the help of probation managers and external partners. However, teachers were more skeptical of these external supports and appreciated assistance that had practical application in the classroom but had little patience for, "more people for us to be accountable to, or more people for us to follow their paperwork."

■ **Principals had multiple responsibilities that often worked at cross purposes with their role of instructional leaders.**

The principal's job grew increasingly complex due to external pressures and demands of accountability and internal needs to increase the capacity of school staff. Almost every Seattle central office department called the principals with questions ranging from discipline data, to bus schedules, to requests for payroll figures. Seattle principals had to exert considerable leadership to integrate multiple agendas especially when there was confusion surrounding new initiatives. One principal, in deciding not to worry about the district's indecisions stated, "I'm just going to sit out until the district has figured out what its focus for the schools really is. Because you're asking us to be budget professionals, to budget for hiring, for instructional leadership, and you can't do it all." Milwaukee principals frequently commented that it was difficult to perform multiple functions that included instructional leadership, student discipline, professional development, budget oversight, marketing, personnel decisions, fundraising, and community relations. Chicago principals had to comply not only with external policy messages to improve teaching practice and to raise test scores, but they also had to address the unique learning needs of their students. One principal, in describing her role in carrying out

central office policies said, "This chair is not a popular one....Some of my directives are questioned, and of course, why not...? My directives are coming from someplace else."

■ **Professional development was fragmented and not directly tied to district initiatives.**

School leaders had little patience for district provided, top-down staff development that did not relate to work going on in the schools and in the classrooms. Milwaukee teachers saw themselves as becoming increasingly self-sufficient in seeking out professional learning. School staff reported they were more proactive in seeking out appropriate professional development from non-district providers than from the district. Chicago teachers in our study were typically critical of the district's efforts at professional development, describing a range of problems from facilitators' lack of preparation to a one-size fits-all approach. A CPS administrator described central office efforts as "drive-by," uncoordinated, and not focused on the core of what teaching is about. In Seattle, professional development for teachers was improving and the strength of the individual professional development offerings was sometimes quite high. However, there was no overarching strategic plan for professional learning.³

■ **Principal leadership was an important determinant in how district-wide policies were implemented.**

Astute principals helped teachers make sense of district initiatives through existing communities of practice and through mediating and buffering district policies to fit into their schools' culture. The strength of school leadership in Seattle was key in determining the school's ability to use district policies to further school goals, mobilize resources needed to build communities of practice, and to create a vision that motivated the community to engage in new ideas about instructional practice. However, schools that lacked a collaborative community found this work to be overwhelming. The role of Milwaukee principals was an important factor in how school staff perceived and participated in school operations. The extent to which principals involved teachers in working on the school's Education Plan (school plan for improvement) affected teachers' perceptions of the quality and legitimacy of the plan. Chicago principals were key actors who interpreted central office messages for their staff and shaped the schools' response to district policies. As the critical link between the central office and the schools, principals mediated relations between district policies and classroom practice.

Recommendations

1 **Superintendents need to have a vision of good instruction.**

Improving test scores is not a vision. It is a political slogan that is used to satisfy politicians and the business community. Instead, superintendents need to spend time in classrooms and have conversations with principals and teachers about how to channel all the district resources and energy into making that vision of good instruction a daily reality in every classroom.

2 **Central office policies and mandates should be evaluated based on how they help principals and teachers improve instruction and student learning.**

Policies that cannot stand up to this scrutiny should be eliminated. School staff need to be involved in designing instructional policies and making decisions about how they will be implemented.

3 **Districts should be responsible for providing a plan, a realistic time-line, and sufficient resources to build staff capacity when new instructional policies are adopted.**

In those plans, the district needs to allow adequate time and opportunity for teachers to observe new instructional methods. The district needs to provide resources for coaching and content experts

to work alongside teachers as they learn how to use the new methods, and they need to supply the resources to purchase necessary tools and materials.

4 **Student academic needs should drive the district's policy agenda.**

Principals and teachers routinely assess student learning and have first-hand knowledge of their academic needs. Central office staff should draw on that enormous expertise when they design new policies and implementation strategies and when they create new communication and support structures.

5 **Professional development should be school-based and embedded in teachers' daily work.**

The district's role is to provide the conditions and resources so that school staff have ample opportunities for individual and group learning that builds knowledge, capacity, and collaboration.

6 **If teachers and principals are to truly focus on instruction, central office demands need to be drastically reduced.**

School staff can no longer be expected to juggle multiple responsibilities and comply with extraneous requests that are cumbersome distractions to teaching and learning.

Research Context and Definitions

This paper is the second report from a large, qualitative study of district-school interactions conducted by the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform. The goal of this report is to help policy makers, practitioners, and others gain insight about what conditions need to be in place for instructional reforms to reach into schools and change classroom practice.

Chicago, Milwaukee, and Seattle approached district-wide initiatives and decentralization in distinct ways: Chicago, through democratic localism (based on site-based and shared decision-making) and high-stakes testing; Milwaukee, through a substantial school choice program, resource reallocation strategies, and actions to restructure the district into a cost-for-service center; and Seattle, through needs-based funding and school-site, standards-based improvement efforts.

This report is based on people's accounts and perceptions of their own work and the work of others. As might be expected, the views of central office staff and school staff members converged at times and deviated considerably at other times. Our hope is that this report will provoke conversations among policy makers, educators, academics and reformers and provide direction in thinking in new and productive ways about the district's role in instructional change.

The Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform does not assert that the perceptions or experiences surfaced in this report are statistically representative of the districts as a whole. However, the perceptions and experiences reflected here represent those that were prevalent among our interview subjects

A description of research design and methodology can be found in Appendix A.

Case Study Summaries

The following are summaries of the three case studies.

The case studies in their entirety can be found in the full report.

Endnotes

- ¹ These plans spelled out each school's strategies for reaching district goals.
- ² Schools failing to meet reading and math cut-off scores were put on probation until their scores improved. These schools were overseen by probation managers who had significant control over curriculum, instruction, staffing, and budget.
- ³ It should be noted that professional development in the three cities had started to be reorganized towards the end of our study.

Chicago Public Schools

Major Policy Initiatives

The Chicago Reading Initiative. In 2001, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) undertook a system wide, K-12 effort to accomplish a major change in the way it supported reading instruction. The central office developed and introduced a four-part, research-based reading framework to help teachers focus attention on the specific literacy skills needed by children and youth. CPS also initially deployed school-based reading specialists to 114 low-performing elementary schools (later expanded to more schools) and provided funds to create classroom libraries in the primary grades. All schools in the system were informed that they were to substantially increase the amount of time dedicated to reading and writing instruction to a minimum of two hours per-day and to use the framework.

Professional Development. Central office administrators presented the education plan for achieving a high-quality instructional program which also offered nine principles to guide the effort to redesign centrally-delivered professional development. An inventory and audit of school and system-level spending on professional development

disclosed serious management and technical problems. In July 2002, CPS's new professional development unit launched an ambitious training program to support the implementation of the reading initiative and to build knowledge and skills for instructional leadership.

Middle-level Management Reorganization. In June 2002, the new CPS leadership team communicated its intent to build instructional capacity as well as to continue to hold schools accountable for results. Replacing six regional offices, the administration created 24 "instructional areas." Each Area Instructional Office (AIO) was charged with the responsibility to provide management and

organizational support to a cluster of schools within its jurisdiction, as well as instructional support and professional development.

Capacity-Building

The CPS approach to changing teacher practice in reading instruction was heavily centered on school-based reading specialists and intensive, system-wide professional development. Initially deployed to the lowest-performing schools, the reading specialist's role was to provide classroom support and ongoing professional development to teachers and principals on how to utilize the reading framework for classroom instruction. Prior to going into the schools, the reading specialists received two weeks of intensive training on the theory behind the reading framework as well as techniques for coaching and mentoring teachers. They also



participated in monthly professional development sessions with central office leaders responsible for the initiative. Teacher resistance to changing instructional practice presented a serious challenge to the reading specialists' ability to carrying out their roles. Although the reading specialists were school-based, they reported to central office. As new players on school teams, issues of establishing trust and credibility among the reading specialists, teachers, and other school staff and consultants had to be resolved prior to creating workable relationships that would result in improved instructional practices.

Attempts to create a coherent and comprehensive professional development program encountered equally, if not more serious, challenges. At the time of the study, teachers in the Chicago system generally were very critical of the central office's professional development offerings. While more teachers were beginning to experience quality professional development, for many it remained largely a fragmented and individual pursuit. Challenges were presented at the central office level as well. The delivery of professional development was fragmented across several units within central office and not all of them reported to the new professional development unit. Central office staffers were unclear about their roles under the new organizational framework and

had diverse perspectives on how to achieve system-wide goals. Clearly, central office relationships needed to be aligned and discrete fiefdoms had to be integrated in order to provide coherent instructional support to schools.

Improving Instruction

Although Chicago remained a site-based system, it was noted during the field research that there was a striking uniformity of instructional strategies, which implied a heavily centralized influence. While the new administration (since 2001) intended to shift to a content-based instructional focus, the central office's emphasis on student achievement outcomes never wavered. A high-stakes accountability system implemented by the previous administration remained in place and its messages continued to resonate at the school level as is reflected by the schools' emphasis on data analysis and test preparation.

Teachers also felt that, in general, not enough time and attention was given to what they thought nor were they given enough time to discuss various instructional techniques with their peers. Instead, they felt that "things are just thrown at us."

Principals and teachers perceived the central office's overriding priority to be raising student performance levels in reading and mathematics to national norms on standardized achievement tests. While teachers and principals labeled the central office's instructional program goals as standards-based, there was little indication from teachers that they had been exposed to or were aware of any substantive ways their teaching practice might change in a standards-based classroom. Teachers typically referred to standards in terms of "coverage," e.g., meeting the system's expectations for specific content that they should be teaching at any given point during the school year, and "consistency," e.g., being on the "same page" from classroom-to-classroom, school-to-school.

There was general appreciation by principals for the instructional tools provided by central office, including the support provided by external partners to probation schools. Teachers, however, felt isolated from most discussions and decisions regarding instructional improvement that occurred away from the school premises. Teachers also felt that, in general, not enough time and attention was given to what they thought nor were they given enough time to discuss various instructional techniques with their peers. Instead, they felt that "things are just thrown at us."

Milwaukee Public Schools

Major Policy Initiatives

Neighborhood Schools. In response to increased market pressure driven by the multiple forms of choice (including vouchers) in Milwaukee, coupled with rising pressure from municipal, state, and federal governments to reduce achievement disparities between schools, the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) launched an aggressive neighborhood schools campaign at both the district and local school levels. The initiative was intended to increase the proportion of high-quality neighborhood schools in the district, making more schools competitive in the marketplace and equalizing opportunity.

Education Plans. The new Education Plan for school improvement, rolled out in 2001-2002, was a key tool for structuring communication, guidance, and accountability between central office and schools as the district increasingly decentralized authority to the school level. The instructions were emphatic that plans focus primarily on state and district standardized tests in analyzing past school performance and in identifying future needs and goals.

Standards. At the time of the study, MPS was implementing several policy initiatives, some directly and some indirectly aimed at improving teaching and learning. Among the policy initiatives aimed directly at improving instruction district-wide were a set of policies adopted in 1997-1998 including academic standards, district proficiencies, assessments, and a more recent district-wide literacy initiative (2001). As with several other initiatives, MPS developed a more fulsome version before the state required the creation of standards. Central office staff members believed that the academic standards could potentially be used as an effective strategy for clarifying the aims and content of instruction and for providing all students with access to reasonably consistent instruction on a range of content. However, standards were not necessarily linked with improving instruction.

District Proficiencies. The district proficiencies were a set of proficiency requirements for 8th grade promotion. In theory, the proficiencies were aimed at increasing instructional quality and student learning by bringing greater coherence and consistency to academic expectations. They were

also intended to increase teacher and student accountability for student performance. MPS developed and implemented a system of performance assessments at about the same time as the proficiency system.

Balanced Assessments. MPS had overhauled its student promotion, graduation, and assessment systems in response to a perceived need to monitor student achievement progress over time. In MPS, the term “balanced assessment” referred to the idea of using several different types of instruments to gain a well-rounded, overall impression of student, school, and district performance. This philosophy of using multiple measures to evaluate schools was prominently embedded in the district’s accountability plan and, at that time, it represented an effort by the district to motivate teachers and students to pursue in-depth conceptual learning around academic content, consistent with the stated goal of standards-based reform. Standardized test scores were treated as an important indicator of school performance along with district performance assessments, and measures such as attendance, promotion, and graduation rates. In 2000-01, MPS expanded on the state’s assessment policy and began administering a standardized assessment so that nine grades would be tested.

District Literacy Initiative. MPS announced a new district literacy initiative that, in addition to emphasizing reading and the teaching of reading across the curriculum, also included numeracy and mathematics. In the 2001-2002 school year, the MPS school board approved a policy to house a literacy coach in every school. They were to act as instructional leaders and on-site professional developers for literacy instruction in the schools.

Capacity-Building

In the Milwaukee Public School system, the Department of Leadership Services was at the heart of district efforts to monitor, inform, and support principals in fulfilling a multitude of responsibilities, including instructional leadership, student discipline, professional development, budget decisions, marketing, personnel decisions, fundraising, and community relations. Principals frequently commented that it was difficult to adequately perform all of these functions.

Most teachers received relatively little professional development with the exception of those teachers who were most highly engaged professionally. Many teachers who were recognized as local school experts sought professional development and then brought the knowledge they gained back to disseminate to other staff member. As a result of the trend

toward self-sufficiency in procuring professional development, teachers and principals accepted increasingly greater personal responsibility for their own learning.

Improving Instruction

School staff perceived the main focus of central office to be on non-instructional, organizational reforms that exerted only indirect effects on instructional practice. While many mid-level central office managers perceived that the district was striving to recover an emphasis on teaching and learning, these managers acknowledged severe

limits on district capacity to interact intensively with schools around the intricacies of instructional delivery. School staff generally believed that the standards were educationally sound and well aligned with state standards. However, the standards specified only content and did not address pedagogy. Furthermore, the central office did little monitoring of teacher adherence to standards and, overall, was non-prescriptive regarding curricular materials and programming, and liberal in the range of textbooks and other materials supplied to schools.



Seattle Public Schools

Major Policy Initiatives

Standards. The Seattle Public Schools (SPS) was engaged in an intense reform effort that was working on many different fronts simultaneously. The district’s mission statement clearly stated the objective: “Academic achievement for every student in every school.” The strategy for achieving that goal was described as a “tight-loose model.” The model was absolutely clear on the outcomes—every student meeting standards—but the district was loose on “how to get there.” In this very site-based district, schools had almost complete freedom to design the curriculum and instructional program to meet the needs of their student population. According to the superintendent the standards were the target.

The Transformational Academic Achievement Planning Process.

While the standards identified the targets, the Transformational Academic Achievement Planning process was designed as the vehicle for helping schools develop their own strategies for reaching the district’s main goals: 1) helping all students meet standards, and 2) eliminating the achievement gap between white students and students of color. Schools were required to analyze all

available data, to develop specific strategies for addressing the top two goals spelled out by the central office for the entire district, and to identify professional development needed to help staff acquire the knowledge and skills to carry out the strategies. At the time, implementation of a meaningful planning process that would yield constructive results seemed possible to both central office administrators and school staff because the work was propelled by a \$26 million grant from a foundation. Schools had a five-year timeline and resources to support their planning.

Professional Development. One of the major ways the district provided support for instructional improvement was through professional development. The district utilized professional development activities as a major forum to communicate policy messages in-depth and directly to teachers. SPS arranged for professional development in several formats for different constituent groups. Most of the initiatives were designed and taught by external providers with grant funds. Two initiatives in particular—the National Science Fund (NSF) science program and the Literacy Initiative—seemed to be well received and seemed to be making a significant difference in instructional practices. Both

had important qualities of being long-term investments with a team of colleagues who also provided ongoing support to help teachers internalize new approaches.

Literacy Initiative. The literacy initiative was the first K-12 initiative targeted to teachers in all content areas. This represented a new level of commitment from SPS to instruction and professional development. Most teachers found the literacy strategies to be very effective in helping students in all the content areas. Teachers agreed that, when a majority of the staff participated, the literacy strategies were permeating schools. Moreover, students were benefiting from the consistency of using the same strategies in a number of different subject areas.

Capacity-Building

The initiatives discussed above represent significant investments and changes in the ways the Seattle school district was attempting to work with schools. Some central office administrators expressed the notion that they were trying to transition from compliance monitoring to coaching. However, SPS could not provide the consistent level of support needed to help teachers change their practice. Teachers rarely saw central office personnel, other than occasional teacher consultants. The number of these consultants was limited and the quality of their services varied widely.



While professional development was one area where most schools felt the district was doing a much better job, at the time of the study, there was no overarching umbrella to integrate professional development activities. As a result, major initiatives were not coordinated under the director of professional development (a new professional development director was hired during the course of the study). Because professional development was not coordinated, not all offerings reinforced the district content or professional practice standards.

Given the distance between the central office and schools, the schools' capacity to develop a coherent transformation plan usually depended on whether or not the school had existing structures in place that fostered a community of practice. Astute school leaders, concerned that there was no strategic plan connecting all of the district initiatives, provided leadership by finding a way for teachers to shape a coherent path for professional learning at the school level. The strength of leadership in the

school was an important factor in determining the school's ability to use district policies and to mobilize the human and fiscal resources needed to further school goals and to change instructional practice. At schools that lacked a collaborative community, the transformation process was overwhelming. Principals had to exert considerable leadership to integrate multiple agendas to create coherence for their staff and to build commitment and ownership at the school level. In this sense, the district underestimated the amount and type of supports principals and teachers would need to transform themselves.

Improving Instruction

Since the relationships between the schools and the central office were characterized largely by distance and disconnection, school perspectives differed significantly from those at central office. In this results-oriented district, the rationale for most of its reform policies revolved around raising student achievement and/or eliminating the achievement gap. Schools, however, perceived the most prominent message was that

they would be held accountable for raising test scores. For example, schools had mixed reactions to the Transformational Academic Achievement Planning process. Most school staff felt that test scores were all that mattered to the central office. School leaders felt that under the "tight-loose" system, no one really cared how you got there if your scores were good.

At the front end of an effort to become a standards-based district, there was only a superficial understanding of what this entailed for classroom practice. References to standards in SPS were consistently communicated in terms of a target or goal (e.g., the "standard" identified by the central office on the norm-referenced Iowa Test of Basic Skills test was the 61st percentile). In district communications, "meeting standards" was defined by test scores. The conversations leaders had about standards were rarely connected to changes in instruction. Although teacher leaders helped to design the standards, our study found a wide range of understanding about what it meant to teach to the standards among teachers. This was a recurring theme: the district succeeded in communicating that standards were the goal, but teachers in the schools remained confused about translating these ideas into practice. The district policy assumed that teachers would know how to do this while teachers looked to the district for direction. With only limited explanations to help teachers recognize how the new expectations might affect their work, few teachers were challenged to rethink their practice.

APPENDIX A: Research Design and Methodology

Our study is based on data that includes interviews, observations, and document collection at both the school and central office levels in these three districts. Interviews were conducted during the 2001 and 2002 school years. During the 2003 school year, we analyzed the data and supplemented it with follow-up interviews.

The data were collected from 185 school-level personnel representing 23 schools across three districts (11 elementary schools, four middle schools and eight high schools.) In each school, we interviewed eight to 10 school-level personnel including school administrators, teachers across different grade levels, and governance council members or parents. It includes interviews with 82 cabinet and mid-level central office staff. Staff

members working in regions or sub-districts and those at the central office were treated as central office staff.

Researchers interviewed central office and school staff asking general and specific questions about instruction including their offices' or schools' instructional goals; strategies for reaching these goals; interactions they had with schools or central offices; district turning points and key players; instructional reform priorities at the district, school, and classroom levels; testing policies, understanding and use of standards; content area initiatives; tools they used to understand and implement policies; views of exemplary district reform strategies; district problems and successes; non-district influences on work; and direction, type, focus, and frequency of interactions between school and central office staff members.

Cross-site analysis for this paper occurred in several ways. We used a computer-based software program called NUD*IST to code and index the data according to constructs derived from our theoretical framework. We field-tested codes to ensure inter-rater reliability. For the purposes of the case studies, we focused our analysis on individuals' descriptions of: 1) history of instructional reform in district; 2) current district instructional initiatives; 3) how district administrators act on and communicate policy messages around instructional reform to the schools; 4) how school people view the district's priorities; 5) tools important to school or central office staff members' work; 6) leadership roles school personnel use to implement district policies and practices; and 7) how districts matter relative to other factors—federal and state mandates, third parties, unions, etc.

APPENDIX B: District Demographics 2001-2002

	Chicago	Milwaukee	Seattle
City Population	2,896,016	597,005	564,158
Number of Public School Students	437,418	97,762	47,449
Number of Schools	597	208	124
% Students eligible for free and reduced lunch	81.9	75.4	40.8
% Amer. Indian/Alaska Native Alaska Native	0.2	1.0	2.6
% Asian/Pacific Islander	3.2	4.3	23.4
% Hispanic	35.8	16.1	10.8
% Black, non-Hispanic	51.3	60.3	23.1
% White, non-Hispanic	9.5	18.3	40.1

*Source: Characteristics of the 100 Largest Public Elementary and Secondary School Districts in the United States: 2001-2002, National Center for Education Statistics.

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