

# **A Delicate Balance:** District Policies and Classroom Practice

Funding for the research study, “Examining Relationships Between Central Office and Schools,” from which this report was drawn, was generously provided by:

The Carnegie Corporation of New York

The Joyce Foundation

The Spencer Foundation

The Helen Bader Foundation

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

The data presented, the statements made, and the views expressed in *A Delicate Balance: District Policies and Classroom Practice* are the sole responsibility of the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform and the authors.

***A Delicate Balance: District Policies and Classroom Practice***

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Published by:

Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform

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# **A Delicate Balance:**

## District Policies and Classroom Practice

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## Acknowledgments

*A Delicate Balance: District Policies and Classroom Practice* is the second report derived from a larger, three-year qualitative study of central office/school interactions. Our thanks to the program officers, board members, and officers of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Joyce Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, the Helen Bader Foundation, and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for making this research possible.

The larger study, “Examining Relationships Between Central Office and Schools,” required the talents, hard work, and scholarship of many people. We are indebted to the principal investigator and consultant, the authors of the three case studies, the contributors to the executive summary, and to the other members of the research team who worked on the three-year study and whose work contributed greatly to this report.

We thank:

Lauren E. Allen; Chicago lead researcher, Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, Chicago. Eric Osthoff and Paula White; Milwaukee lead researchers, University of Wisconsin, Madison. Judy Swanson; Seattle lead researcher, Research For Quality Schools, Seattle. Patricia Burch; principal investigator, University of Wisconsin, Madison. James Spillane; consultant, Northwestern University, Evanston.

Other members of the research team: Chicago: Christina Warden and Diana Lauber; Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform. Milwaukee: Bill Clune; University of Wisconsin. Seattle: Michael Knapp, Teresa McCaffrey, and Brynna Ford; University of Washington. We are especially grateful to Lauren E. Allen, for her scholarship and to Dawn Thompson, for her insightful contributions to the Executive Summary. We owe great thanks to Vigunya Vortanitkitku, our NUD\*IST expert, coder, and database coordinator. Thank you also to Melissa McGowan for her assistance in coding transcribed interviews.

We were fortunate to have the advice, insight, and feedback from many people serving on our advisory committees. However, the statements made and views expressed in this report are the sole responsibility of the Cross City Campaign.

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We are grateful to the Cross City Campaign Board of Directors and the Seattle Local Board for their review and comments on this report. Thank you to the Cross City Campaign’s staff, with special thanks to Eva Moon, who was an invaluable and thoughtful editor. Thank you to Pinzke Design for their fine work. And a big thank you to Karen Girolami Callam for her excellent editing of the case studies.

We owe a special thanks to Mark Smiley, University of Illinois, Chicago, for guiding us through the initial research conception and for helping us to begin this journey.

And finally and most importantly, the three-year research study and this report would not have been written if it weren’t for the generosity of the people we interviewed. We owe a large debt to the many teachers, central office staff members, principals, other school administrators, and parents who took time out of impossibly busy schedules to sit down and talk with our research staff about their views and their work.

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## Foreword

**T**he 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

**S**ince 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

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

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.

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

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resulted in a culture of skepticism 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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.<sup>2</sup> 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

**T**he 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.

Teachers generally felt isolated from most discussions and decisions about instructional improvement that occurred outside their schools.

■ **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 leader.**

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.<sup>3</sup>

■ **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 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 in 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.



**In each of the following case studies, the researcher provides the reader with a brief history of the district's role in instructional reform, a description of major district instructional reforms that were initiated during the time of the research, the ways in which central office staff communicated and implemented these initiatives, the school staff members' perspective on district instructional priorities, and the roles that school leaders played in improving instruction.**

## Case Study

# The Chicago Public Schools

By Lauren E. Allen

## Introduction

The story of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) during our field research is of a large urban district tackling systemic reform. Since passage of the 1988 Chicago School Reform Act, the Chicago system has undergone reform in three distinct phases. During the first phase (1988-1995), decentralization transformed the 600+ schools into a site-managed system. School restructuring efforts set at least 35 percent of CPS elementary schools on the road to improvement (Bryk et al, 1993). In the second phase (1995-2001), high-stakes accountability practices gave CPS a national reputation for policies ending social promotion and intervening in low-performing schools. Central office efforts in the third phase, beginning in 2001, focused on achieving a district-wide, high-quality instructional program.

Over the past three decades, the “silver bullet” of school improvement has ricocheted from central office mandates to organic school change, from teacher enhancement to principal leadership, from parent and community involvement to increased state and (now) federal government oversight. The story of the Chicago Public Schools suggests that effective instructional improvement requires dynamic and reciprocal relationships throughout the entire educational system and appropriate instructional tools and resources. The Chicago story also suggests a definitive role for the central office in supporting instructional change and improvement in local schools.

## Systemic Reform

The 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* launched a contentious and continuing national debate over the quality of public education. An

ensuing tidal wave of cumulative policy initiatives resulted in the call for systemic reforms. Politicians and business leaders targeted classrooms and called for teachers to employ more rigorous and intellectually ambitious instructional practices in order to improve student out-

comes. Helping the vast majority of young people to surpass minimum competency expectations and to achieve high academic standards became the overriding goal of U.S. school districts.

Two linked approaches created the context for systemic reform (Cohen, 1995). The first created new policy instruments to “drive” or guide instruction. These included new content standards and instructional frameworks; standards-based assessments that focused students’ and teachers’ work on intellectually authentic tasks; ambitious curricula that were consistent with new standards and assessments; and changes in teacher education that undergirded quality instruction. The second approach facilitated a coherent direction for change by reducing the overlapping and often conflicting policies that obstruct substantive reforms.

In its pursuit of systemic reform, CPS was faced with the challenge of how to devise a coherent and coordinated system of instructional guidance that was linked to standards and that supported large-scale instructional change. This arguably included sorting out roles and responsibilities at all levels of the educational system—federal, state, local, and school—and aligning all efforts toward the goal of improved student achievement.



## Recent History of the District's Role in Instructional Reform

### The Charge for Reform

On a 1987 visit to Chicago, U.S. Secretary of Education William J. Bennett declared the city's school system "close to educational meltdown" (Lenz, 1987). At that time, the troubled CPS was a system roiling with power politics, educational neglect, scandal, and blame, conditions that would cause Bennett to declare Chicago schools "the worst in the nation" (Lenz, 1987) and galvanize a broad base of business, civic, parent, and community leaders to provide the impetus for reform.

Responding to the business community's criticism of the public schools, teacher union unrest, and negative national headlines, the mayor in 1987 convened an "Education Summit" of leaders from the business community, civic agencies, area universities, the teachers' union, and the board of education to seek sustainable solutions to long-standing problems. In the fall of 1987, a 19-day teachers' strike ignited and mobilized widespread demonstrations of parents and community activists who demanded not only the reopening of schools but also the redress of intolerable educational conditions. In response, the mayor appointed a large group of parent

and community representatives to the Education Summit. Meanwhile several bills introduced by various Chicago reform coalitions of parent and advocacy groups were struggling through the state legislature, eventually resulting in a compromise school reform bill. In December 1988, the Illinois General Assembly adopted the Chicago School Reform Act and the governor signed it into law.

### The 1988 Chicago School Reform Act

In a radical dismantling of central office bureaucracy, the 1988 law transferred considerable authority over instruction, resources, hiring, and autonomy to local schools. Its major components were:

- A set of goals to guide school improvement planning over a five-year period
- The reduction in central office staff, with a shift of \$40 million dollars to the schools
- A system of school-based management centered on the establishment of Local School Councils (LSCs) consisting of parents, teachers, community members, students, and the principal, with authority over school improvement plans, budgets, and principal hiring
- Cadres of teachers advising on curriculum and instruction
- Principal authority to fill teaching positions based on merit alone
- The shift of state poverty dollars to school control
- The creation of 40 new schools that had been school branches

### Chicago School Reform—Second Phase

By 1995, state legislators and Chicago's business and civic leaders were impatient with the lack of significant progress at schools where children were still performing far below national norms. With civic and business support, the mayor asked for and received authority from the state legislature to assume control over the school system. The amended School Reform Act gave the mayor unfettered authority to appoint a new, scaled-down, five-member school board of trustees and a central office team headed by a chief executive officer (CEO). The CEO was responsible for the management of the system and had all the powers and duties of a general superintendent of schools.

The school board president and the CEO rapidly laid out key elements of a system-wide plan that included academic standards, a new testing system, student promotion standards, streamlined school improvement planning, and interventions in low-performing schools. The board of trustees and the CEO created a new Office of Accountability and gave it the mandate to "focus on identifying and supporting the desired educational outcomes and standards of performance, giving schools a certain time period to reach them, measuring those outcomes at the end of the predetermined time, and then providing incentives for success and penalties for failure" (Chicago Public Schools, 1997).

The new accountability system consisted of a set of corrective actions and technical supports. Policy tools included: 1) remediation, a relatively mild sanction aimed at correcting school problems in the early stages; 2) probation, a more structured intervention which included central office supports and significant central control over curriculum, instruction, staffing, and budget; and 3) reconstitution, the most severe sanction, with authority to replace the principal, the staff, and order new Local School Council elections. To a large extent, the support provided by central office at this time through a network of external partners leveraged an existing base of relationships in the city. Ten area colleges, universities, educational organizations, the central office, and “successful” principals provided technical assistance and support to schools on remediation or probation.

During the 1996-97 school year, the CPS central administration sent shock waves through the school system by placing 71 elementary and 38 high schools on probation. This tough action attracted media attention and generated big headlines. Intervention in one out of five Chicago Public Schools sent a clear message that the central office would no longer tolerate low student achievement. At the outset, the probation process was widely criticized as being arbitrary and punitive in nature. Schools that found themselves on the “probation list” were stunned. Teachers, parents, and students felt stigmatized.

Principals felt exploited. One clear effect of the central office’s new approach to accountability, however, was a distinct shift at the school level to a heavy concentration on devising strategies to raise test scores (Allen & Hallett, 1999).

## District Instructional Initiatives

In 2001, a new central office leadership team communicated its intent to work on building systemic instructional capacity as well as to continue to hold schools accountable for results. Within the first year of the new administration, six former administrative regions were reorganized into 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.

There was a measure of appreciation for the previous administration’s efforts among those interviewed for this study at the central office and schools. At the central office, there was a sense that former leaders had restored public confidence in the Chicago Public Schools. According to a central office administrator, there was general acknowledgment that before accountability became the watchword in Chicago, “everybody was saying, well, you know, if they did their job, I could do my job.

Now, people are saying maybe that’s true, but I still got to make sure I do my job.” This administrator went on to say that the previous administration’s policy of imposing sanctions on low-performing schools was necessary to “shake things up a little bit” so that everyone in the school system would accept responsibility for student results. Additionally, mayoral control “brought an urgency,” that is, the new administration “knew they had to get results quickly. For the first time, schools had to perform better or consequences would happen.”

Another central administrator felt that it was necessary for the school system to experience the previous phase in order for the current administration to be able to focus more heavily on instruction:

It’s like your primary needs. You’re not going to be interested in learning if you come to school hungry, sleepy, sick, and so on. So, when the previous administration started to address issues of facilities, local school councils and their relationships with the principals, those were issues that the administration really had to pay attention to first.

A teacher at High School A noted: I think the first thing you need to have is a comfortable environment. You can definitely see where the district has spent money on maintenance of this building. It’s a decent place for your kid, you know? And it’s a decent place to work.

Two comprehensive efforts were launched in 2001-02 with direct oversight provided by the Chief Educational Officer: 1) the Chicago Reading Initiative; and 2) a system-wide professional development program. A new Reading Unit was created to realign all of the central functions devoted to reading and language arts under one domain. Similarly, a new Office of Professional Development was established to consolidate the district's professional development functions and to be at the center of the district's transition to a more intensive instructional focus.

**The Chicago Reading Initiative**

At the beginning of the 2001-02 school year, only one-third of CPS elementary students read at or above national norms. To address this issue, the first major initiative of the new administration was the Chicago Reading Initiative. Central office administrators described this effort as a research-based, content-focused strategy to provide a systemic (K-12) response to students' needs. One administrator noted that under decentralization, the school system had become "an unmanageable type of monster with everybody just kind of doing their own thing...that's really where reading fell down." According to another administrator,

There were pieces of reading in a lot of different places and that led to a lack of clarity in the field in terms of what should actually be taking place. A full-time focus was needed so that we could really begin to look at reading from the standpoint of what the research says works best for schools.

An expert with extensive previous involvement with the National Reading Panel was recruited from the University of Illinois at Chicago to work with the Chief Educational Officer on the development of the reading initiative. They introduced a four-part instructional framework to help teachers focus attention on the specific reading skills.

Central office took additional steps, including the deployment of school-based reading specialists to 114 of the school system's lowest-performing schools to provide classroom support and ongoing professional development to teachers and principals. 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. CPS also provided dollars to create classroom libraries in the primary grades. One of the reading specialists noted:

This is the first instance in [my] 18 years that somebody's actually been interested in a 'reading credential', which is unbelievable. But it's true. I think it's a very interesting shift in the system and a positive one.

**Chicago Reading Framework Focus of Instruction**

Word Knowledge	Fluency
Refers to children's understanding of word recognition and meaning. Includes sight vocabulary, phonemic awareness and phonics, spelling, structural analysis, and word meaning.	The combination of reading speed (words per minute), oral reading accuracy (number of words correctly identified), phrasing (grouping of words and attention to punctuation), and expression.
Reading Comprehension	Writing
The construction of meaning by making connections between what is already known and the new information encountered. Includes an understanding of text structure (headings, subheadings, graphics, and the organization of print).	The process of composing original text. Involves detailed understanding of the skills and strategies of reading. Writers identify the purpose for their communication (to narrate, to describe, to persuade, to explain) and vary their language and style according to their audience.

Source: CPS Website

The reading specialists' role was to ensure that the reading framework was being implemented in classrooms. 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. At the schools, their responsibilities were to spend their time on staff development consistent with the instructional framework, classroom observations, classroom demonstrations, coaching and providing feedback to teachers, and helping teachers and principals assess and evaluate the progress of reading instruction under the new initiative.

***The Challenge of Changing Practice.***

The reading specialists had a difficult role to play in getting teachers to change their instructional practices. As one reading specialist noted, "My job probably has more to do with trust than any other job in the system, so I had to build a little credibility and some trust with teachers." The specialist described the challenge of coaching teachers to be more reflective, less defensive, and to assume an active stance over their own learning:

We want [teachers] to look at how they are teaching. If you have a lot of kids that are flunking the unit test, you have some problems. You need to go back and re-teach some things. I think that what has happened is, as a whole system, we've been so ingrained in just keeping up with the pacing that we forget to go back and re-teach. We're trying to get [teachers] to change their perception of how they're doing it.

***What's Changed?*** The Chicago Reading Initiative attempted to accomplish a major change in the way CPS worked to build capacity to teach reading. Prior to the reading initiative, this function was performed in a couple of ways. A school would use its discretionary funds to hire a curriculum or reading specialist to assist in reading. An administrator noted that persons in these positions often were assigned to do other duties: "A reading specialist gets used as a substitute teacher, an extra associate, assistant principal—overall the stories are legion about how badly-used they were." A second approach was through centrally-funded programs such as Read and Write Well that sometimes had to stretch scarce resources to try to serve as many schools as possible. (See discussion below under Communicating and Implementing District Instructional Initiatives.) Under CPS's new initiative, reading specialists were assigned to the schools, they did not report to the principal (they reported to central office), and their responsibilities were focused solely on reading. According to one central office administrator:

The principals have been told that these individuals are not to be used for anything other than reading matters. They are not to be used for substituting; they are not to be pulled for other sorts of duties. As a matter of fact, they report directly to the central office, so if there's any deviation from what they have been told are their duties and responsibilities, the central office can pull them from that particular school.

**Professional Development**

A recent research study on teacher professional development within the Chicago Public Schools found that while more CPS teachers were experiencing quality professional development, for many teachers it remained largely a fragmented and individual pursuit. Moreover, teachers reported that their professional development lacked qualities to make it effective (Smylie et al., 2001). In our study, a CPS administrator described the short-comings of previous central office efforts:

I'd probably say three things about it in general. One is that it was 'drive-by' in comparison—no sustainability. Two, it was not coordinated or coherent with system goals or school-level goals. It was fragmented in the sense that even central office units weren't talking to each other and were duplicating services. And three, it was not content-focused. Instead, it was focused on all the other things that kind of surround teaching but not the core of what teaching is about.

This central office administrator's view validated the views of teachers in the current study who typically were very critical of the central office's efforts at professional development for many of the same reasons. According to one teacher, "eating donuts and writing lesson plans" was how her colleagues spent their time in mandatory staff development workshops.

The CPS Education Plan offered nine principles of effective professional development that administrators said were guiding the redesign effort:

## CPS Professional Development Principles

<b>Content</b>	<b>1. Curriculum-Focused:</b> Deepens staff knowledge of the subjects they teach and provides them with research-based instructional strategies that support improved student learning.
	<b>2. Student-Centered:</b> Enhances staff understanding and appreciation for the unique gifts and talents of all students and improves staff skills in creating productive learning environments that are responsive to student needs.
	<b>3. Data-Driven:</b> Strengthens staff skills to use multiple sources of information to analyze the impact of their instruction and programs on student learning and utilize data to determine priorities, establish plans, monitor progress, and adjust direction as required.
<b>Process</b>	<b>4. Coherent:</b> Aligns professional development programs and activities with school-wide goals and system-level priorities and builds a common language across schools and the entire system.
	<b>5. Continuous:</b> Produces a variety of on-going, job-embedded professional development programs and activities to address the needs of individuals and schools at different developmental stages.
	<b>6. Results-oriented:</b> Establishes clear goals for improving teaching and learning; provides opportunities to build knowledge, refine skills, practice new learning, obtain feedback, receive coaching; and evaluates results in terms of their impact on improving student learning.
<b>Context</b>	<b>7. Learning Communities:</b> Develops professional communities that work collaboratively to help adults discuss their work, problem solve collectively, reflect on their practice, and take responsibility for improving student learning.
	<b>8. Shared Leadership:</b> Identifies and supports skilled teachers and administrative leaders who utilize principles of adult learning and change management models to transform classroom instruction and organizational performance.
	<b>9. Access to Resources:</b> Requires extended and sustained time, access to research-based expertise, high-quality staff members, and adequate financial resources to support adult learning and collaboration.

Source: *An Education Plan for the Chicago Public Schools (2002)*.

The CPS professional development initiative was facing daunting challenges, according to an inventory and audit of school and system-level spending on professional development (Chicago Public Education Fund). This analysis compared CPS spending to other school districts, and evaluated the results against the above principles. Among the audit's findings was that the Chicago Public Schools spent \$194 million on professional development in 2001-2002. The spending occurred on two levels: the central office controlled \$123 million, roughly 3.4 percent of the district's \$3.6 billion operating budget. Of the centrally-controlled spending, \$56 million was for instruction-free days or other times for teacher professional development. Additional audit findings were:

- **Standards.** There were no common standards for instructional quality, and this hindered efforts to provide targeted support to measure progress and to maintain accountability.
- **Strategy.** Spending on professional development for individuals and schools was fragmented and uneven, undermining a comprehensive strategy.
- **Expenditures.** Contractual "professional development days" negotiated for teachers were a major expenditure and missed opportunity, but one that could be easily recaptured.

In July 2002, CPS's new professional development unit launched an ambitious summer training program to support the implementation of the reading initiative. The training institute was focused on building knowledge and skills for instructional leadership system-wide. Multiple groups of participants, ranging in number from 24 to 1,500, participated in the training sessions. These included the 24 Area Instructional Officers (AIOs) that had been identified as part of the district reorganization to support the new instructional focus; principals and assistant principals in the lowest-performing (quartile one) schools; leadership teams from an additional 178 schools (quartiles two and above); and summer school teachers (regular education, English Language Learners [ELL], and special education) who received 60 hours of professional development in designing and piloting reading instructional strategies. According to CPS administrators, each training institute had extensive follow-up, consistent with CPS's new principles of effective professional development.

They raised issues ranging from how to help lower-performing schools become more self-sufficient, to how to develop an array of instructional supports that would be available to all schools on an ongoing basis.

The challenge ahead for the central office was to continue to streamline and align its array of professional development opportunities consistent with the principles contained in its education plan. This goal was compromised by system fragmentation, confirmed by the aforementioned inventory/audit and by teachers and administrators interviewed for this study. As one CPS administrator noted, there is always a provision for "planned redundancy" in systems, but CPS has "lots and lots of redundancy that we [don't] need to have." Resolving the issues concerning roles, relationships, cooperation, and authority would require deep efforts.

## The Education Plan

In September 2002, the central office presented an eight-point plan for achieving a high-quality instructional program. The plan included the following components:

- Building instructional capacity
- Having high-quality teaching and leadership
- Creating learning communities and providing professional development
- Supporting student development and post-secondary training and education
- Having schools as centers of communities in partnership with families
- Strengthening existing high school programs
- Expanding choice within neighborhoods
- Ensuring accountability to support improvement in all schools

In our field research, central office administrators identified the following challenges to implementing this agenda:

***Creating a Coherent Instructional***

***Focus.*** Central administrators identified the priority to align central office resources to create a coherent instructional support system. According to one administrator, “There was a strong sense, from my perspective and the field perspective, that there was fragmentation within the system that led to a lack of clarity in the field in terms of what should actually be taking place.” To advance an instructional agenda, this administrator felt the central office needed “to realign things so that they make sense and everyone is clear on our focus so that their work can proceed in a more focused manner.” The same administrator claimed that the central office was employing an intentional strategy to create a coherent instructional focus as follows:

We’re boring in that we’re saying the same thing over and over and over again because, you know, we want people to get it. We want the language to be consistent. We feel that the importance of having a simple reading framework is to ensure that people clearly understand what it is they should be doing.

***Supporting All Schools.*** Some central administrators recalled their days as principals and their relationships with central office: “There was no support whatsoever from central office” and “I just know what it’s like to be out at a school trying to get an answer to something and just getting the run around.” These administrators identified the need to expand the external support system from lower-performing schools to all schools. They raised issues ranging from how to help lower-performing schools become more self-sufficient to how to develop an array of instructional supports that would be available to all schools on an ongoing basis. To the suggestion that creating a more coherent infrastructure of support might require an ambitious effort to retrain central office support staff, an administrator responded that efforts of this nature needed to be “across the board.”

***Strengthening Instructional***

***Leadership.*** CPS’s capacity-building plans included both teachers and principals. Central office administrators, as well as building-level administrators, emphasized the need for a change in teaching practice before students would achieve high standards. Additionally, central administrators emphasized the importance of helping school principals become effective instructional leaders. A central office administrator noted that it was time to attend to the “real issue of education, that is, the teacher

teaching and the student learning. Everybody is realizing that we’re not going to make a change in the system for students until we make sure that teachers can teach and students can learn.”

***Maintaining External Pressure.*** On the role of providing external oversight and pressure on schools to improve, one administrator defended the previous administration’s tough stance, noting:

People that don’t want to change aren’t going to change just by you going in there and saying, in a nice way, ‘It’s time to change, would you please change?’ Sometimes if you can’t change people’s [attitude] at least you can change the way they do things. Without that kind of toughness, many of those schools were not going to change because it was so inbred in so many of our teachers that they were doing the best that they could.

Another administrator appeared to be no less tough-minded but somewhat more willing to take school culture into account:

You’ve got to remember this reading initiative is new. You have to acknowledge our reading specialists for what they are, as people who go out and dance the dance, and they’re part of the process now. So anytime you add in a new entity, things change.

Underlying this recognition was the resolution to stay the course:

One of the reading instructors called me this morning: ‘These teachers are resistant in this particular thing and that particular thing. Should I back off?’ I said, ‘No! We won’t back off. Go back and do this, or ask them that, or tell them this. Don’t be disruptive and try to be supportive, but don’t back off. This isn’t optional, but, you know, let’s be polite about it.’ We care very much what our teachers are doing.

The identification of these challenges by central office administrators suggested their belief that a key continuing role for central office was to provide a balance of both support and pressure for instructional improvement.

Early implementation of the Chicago Reading Initiative illustrated how a systemic effort can catalyze both positive and negative effects, creating new resources but also new tensions at the central office and schools.

## Communicating and Implementing District Instructional Initiatives

**E**arly implementation of the Chicago Reading Initiative illustrated how a systemic effort can catalyze both positive and negative effects, creating new resources but also new tensions at the central office and schools.

### At the Schools

The introduction of the reading initiative caused at least one central instructional support program, the Comprehensive Approach to Student Achievement (CASA), to be canceled and another, Read Write Well, to be put on hold, pending redesign.

**CASA.** The previous administration’s CASA program, which was scheduled to begin implementation in the 2001-02 school year, was designed to provide curriculum support to the 200 lowest-performing schools identified by the central office. Each school was to receive \$50,000 to select a curriculum and \$40 per pupil for textbooks. Working cooperatively, the departments of Curriculum and Instruction and Accountability had compiled a catalogue of curriculum models to assist schools in their selection. The leadership change at the top led to CASA being canceled. Schools, unfortunately, held a jaded view of this type of occurrence. A teacher at School B (a higher-performing elementary school) noted:

I’ve been in this system long enough to know that you just go from thing to thing and every time we do one of these things, it’s the be-all, end-all. And the minute someone else [comes] in, we chuck ‘em all.

**Read Write Well.** During the study period, the new central office team considered the possibility of salvaging the Read Write Well program. A question for consideration was whether Read Write Well, which had produced moderately positive results despite limited capacity, could be aligned with the new reading initiative. Read Write Well created a voluntary literacy specialist position to work in schools. As stipulated, these were schools above the probation school level (25 percent to 35 percent of students in participating schools were at or above national norms in reading). The program was restricted to 90 schools, giving each of six centrally-assigned literacy specialists responsibility for 15 schools. Thus, the amount of time that specialists could actually spend in the schools working with teachers was limited to only one day per month, on average.

### At the Central Office

**Uncertainty.** Some central office staff had initial concerns over how the new instructional program might change the focus of their work. For example, although the Department of Curriculum and Instruction no longer had responsibility for reading/lan-

guage arts, it retained responsibility for providing instructional support for the other content areas of math, science, and social studies. A specific example is the Chicago Urban Systemic Program (CUSP) which provided math and science instructional support to high schools and elementary/middle schools. Funded by a National Science Foundation grant, one of the program's functions was to provide overall professional development in the content areas of mathematics and science for the entire system. According to a program administrator, leadership change had the following impact:

There's tremendous upheaval when administrations change, because it's just not the top guy. It's all of those people that work under him, and who they impact, that is changing. And so we don't know what professional development means any more. Is the new professional development unit going to include content area stuff? Is it going to include generic teacher training? We don't know.

**Mixed Messages.** The Department of Critical School Support monitored school activities in lower-performing schools and also conducted instructional reviews. Staff from this department visited schools, helped to identify school-specific needs, and wrote reports with recommendations, which were to be addressed in the school's corrective action plan and its school improvement plan. This department also assigned

external partners to these schools. During the transition, one of this department's early tasks was to make sure that the reading specialists, the school principals, and the external partners were working in concert. Conflicts between principals, reading specialists, and external partners emerged due to confusion over roles. According to one administrator, "The principal should be the instructional leader so the principal and the reading specialist have to work together." Another administrator claimed that the schools were definitely getting mixed messages from central office:

I'm not sure how successfully the entire central office has been engaged in [this] vision. There are some things that really worry me. For example, within the Office of Accountability there are 10 people who go out and tell schools to do direct instruction, which doesn't particularly mesh with the reading initiative. I know that there are efforts afoot trying to align these things up, but I'm not quite sure that [it's happening]...I don't know about putting all of our eggs in one basket, but if this is important then everybody should be doing it. They shouldn't be doing other things that could be competing.

#### **Gaining Cooperation/Buy-In.**

Communication clearly is a key element within any change initiative, as well as an ongoing challenge. Speaking optimistically, one central office administrator commented on central office communication patterns:

I think we're moving towards that point where we realize that units that are within CPS need to complement one another, need to talk with one another rather than believing that each individual unit must be a stand-alone, all-encompassing piece.

This administrator was referring to departments with responsibilities for instructional support to schools such as early childhood, bilingual and special education, and the gaps and redundancies that can occur as they carry out their roles in the absence of structures and processes for collaboration and coordination.

Sometimes a high level of priority was needed before an initiative gained the attention—and cooperation—of others. For example, a central office administrator felt she gained the cooperation of other central office units only when the central office's organization chart showed her program directly linked to the CEO and Chief Educational Officer. Then, "everyone looked at us in a different light." Another administrator provided a similar summary of CPS relationship patterns:

I've been in a few places before Chicago over the years and I must say, I've never seen a place quite as top down as it, and I don't mean that the leaders are intrusive. I mean people on the line, people on the ground level, really

want to know what the people above them think...a kind of waiting to see what the boss thinks. You know, the sort of notion is, we don't want to talk to anybody that nobody sent. There's really a strong thing in the system and in the city.

***Accommodating Diverse Perspectives.***

Other issues discussed by central office administrators suggested the need for ways to build consensus across diverse perspectives on how to achieve system-wide goals and to integrate discrete areas of work. Through the following story, one administrator shared an insight on how two program areas came to a meeting of the minds:

A reading program manager received a call from a science program manager expressing concern about the impact of the reading initiative on science education. Specifically, the science program manager anticipated that the increased emphasis on literacy would require students to surrender their lab time to the textbook. The science program manager had seen the tape [announcing the literacy initiative] and went, 'Uh-oh! He's gonna mess up science education. This guy doesn't know what he's doing.' The science program manager sent the reading program manager a strong e-mail message, initiating a back and forth e-mail exchange. The reading

program manager held his ground, explaining to the science program manager how the two programs could be integrated. Some months later, the two managers were in a meeting together for the first time. The reading manager thought the science manager was going to continue expressing her concerns in person. But to his surprise, she said, 'You know, you won me over, I'm on board. I want you to know that we set up our year's science education stuff and incorporated your stuff and you're right. It's not an issue.'

The reading program manager underscored the significance of this single interaction between program units within central office:

That science program manager sits down multiple times, meets with every science teacher or department head in the high school and in the middle school upper grades. Any in-service that's planned for those people, the science program manager plans it. If that program manager is on board and says, 'Hey wait a minute, this [reading initiative] isn't stupid, this actually makes sense,' this means when I go out to a high school and say we need to do this reading initiative, instead of all the science people going, 'Oh, yeah, here we go, you know, yawn,' a number of them are sitting in there saying, 'Hey, this is what we heard about from our people.'

**"I think we should start all over when it comes to assessment and accountability, taking what we've got with all of its imperfections and trying to create some better indicators of school improvement."**

The science program manager's contacts with classroom people in the schools were invaluable for helping to facilitate the integration of the reading initiative with science instruction at local schools. As the reading program manager noted, "Yeah, I want those people on board. I want any lever that'll work. Any lever that will get kids the instruction they need."

**Unresolved Issues**

Central office interviews identified two additional domains of instructionally-related issues that had not been given priority in the current administration's instructional agenda:

***Student Assessment.*** One administrator noted that the new CEO intended to improve the district's research, analysis, and evaluation

capability in order to make the district more “data driven.” What was equally important to this administrator was that revisions in student assessment also be considered:

I think we should start all over when it comes to assessment and accountability, taking what we’ve got with all of its imperfections and trying to create some better indicators of school improvement. I’m really hoping that this central office is shifting away from—somebody called it command central—to an instructional support office. I think we’ve got to get rid of the Iowa test in the next couple of years. ESEA [the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act] is going to change assessment and accountability in the next couple of years, but how hard are we all going to lobby the state to do it right?

**Special Education.** The second key unaddressed issue was special education, an area where people at both the central office and school level expressed serious concerns. A central office administrator explained that the “model” underlying the legislation for special education was flawed, because it did not help to distinguish students’ learning difficulties from problems due to poor instruction. Moreover, according to this administrator, “none of the schools” had the resources for the “extremely expensive” remedial strategies associated with special education. “The system is broken,” this administrator said.

## School Perspectives on the District’s Instructional Priorities

**A**cademic standards and instructional frameworks, assessment and accountability systems, and professional development for standards-based instruction are among the tools of systemic reform that are used to change classroom instruction. Principals and teachers in the sample schools expressed a mixture of appreciation and constructive criticism of the central office’s provision of these instructional resources and tools. Schools also clearly held a jaded and fatigued view of the policy and program shifts that inevitably accompanied a change in top district leadership. Moreover, school staff had even stronger and more widely held concerns about the district’s assessment and special education programs than voiced in central office interviews.

### Academic Standards

Both teachers and principals referred to Chicago’s instructional program as “standards-based.” There was, however, little recollection from teachers in our sample of how they had initially been exposed to standards other than through the receipt of the “standards book.” Nor did teachers articulate any deep changes in teaching practice that may have been underway. Teachers and principals typically talked about standards in

terms of the need for a system-wide set of student achievement expectations by grade level, for teacher guidance, and for instructional consistency across classrooms within schools and across schools. A teacher at Elementary School B noted, “You have to know what you’re teaching. I mean, if you don’t have standards, you’d have no way to judge anybody.” The principal at School D stated:

There were a lot of inconsistencies within the school system—two schools being right next door to each other 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. And that the teachers were given copies, so that the teachers clearly understood what they were expected to do.

During the time of this study, the lesson plan was the ubiquitous manifestation of CPS standards implementation. In addition to language about “expectations,” teachers referred to standards in the language of “coverage,” i.e., they were required to meet the system’s expectations for specific content being taught at any given time during the school year. To help the schools in this regard, the central office provided the Structured Curriculum, a detailed daily lesson plan for each of the core content areas. A teacher at School B explained the benefit of having such a tool:

Years ago, you would follow the textbook, chapter by chapter, page by page. And now, the board has given us their own Structured Curriculum, which we follow day by day. And it tells you lesson one, on day one, lesson two, on day two. So if the student transfers in from another school, we can be on the same page, and if one of my students transfers out, the teacher at his or her new school can pick up where we left off.

### Curriculum and Instruction

Although CPS was a decentralized system, lesson planning was a mode through which the central office influenced the school curriculum. Principals and teachers at each school mentioned the central office mandate that teachers prepare and submit weekly lesson plans to the central office for review, indicating the alignment between the classroom lesson, the state goal(s) and the Chicago academic standard(s). School personnel also were beginning to notice increased central office attention on academic content and pedagogy. Following the launch of the Chicago Reading Initiative, the principal of High School E noted an increased emphasis on teaching students to read differently: “. . .as a structural tool that helps kids decode and see meaning, and build meaning into the printed page. We hear [that] in every meeting.” Schools were also noticing efforts at capacity-building. During the central office’s ambitious professional development effort during the summer of 2002, the

principal at School D noted: “I think one of the main differences [with the new reading initiative] is that there is an attempt being made to make sure that everyone within the school system is in-serviced.”

### Instructional Support

On the one hand, schools appreciated the resources that often accompanied new programs. On the other hand, there were occasions when schools viewed a new initiative as an additional burden. For example, CPS’s MINT (Mentoring and Induction of New Teachers) program provided mentoring and professional development support to new teachers in meeting their certification requirements. At the time of this study, the central office had expanded the MINT program to four years to align with the state’s newly revised teacher certification program which gave teachers four years to obtain a standard teaching certificate. A High School E teacher saw this commitment as onerous:

The board has started this program called the MINT program. At first it was a one-year program. Then it was a two-year year program. And now, all teachers coming in have to go through it for four years. The program, I think, has good intentions. But four years—that’s four years that a teacher has to give up to go to a MINT class. The intention was to help support these new teachers. But then again, you know, there has to be some balance.

Somewhat counter-intuitively, the Structured Curriculum was well received at both the higher and lower-performing schools in this study Chicago sample (it was required in the probation schools). Principals explained that inexperienced teachers needed the structure and the easy reference to resources provided by this tool, and that it was a useful addition to the instructional repertoire of more experienced teachers as well. As noted by the School C principal, “They give you the bibliography, the homework, everything is written there. The only thing that you have to do is put enthuse (sic) into it.” A high school teacher at School A liked the fact that at his discretion, “. . .I’m going to take some of this and not use some of the other,” meaning that he didn’t have to “reinvent the wheel” every time he did a lesson plan.

Overall, our sample schools appeared to exhibit a justifiable “wait and see” attitude in response to central office initiatives, as schools have seen many programs come and go.

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For example, when School D was still slated to receive CASA resources (prior to the program's cancellation), the head teacher at School D displayed a sense of cautious anticipation:

Now that we are a CASA school, we've had more interaction with central office. The central office wants to make sure that they are as fully supportive as possible in giving resources and manpower, and staff development. It's just that this is new for them as well, and so the way it was coming across [from central office] was, 'this is all new, but we're going to work together. Let us know what you need, but we're taking one step at a time. We're kind of feeling our way.'

### The Reading Initiative

The principals of both the low-performing School D and the higher-performing School C spoke positively about the new reading initiative. The principal at School D felt even though the school's external partner and on-staff curriculum specialist had previously exposed School D teachers to many of the strategies that the newly-provided reading specialist presented, the new reading initiative reinforced those best practices and "allowed the teachers to connect a little better. It gave the teachers a larger menu of best practices that they could choose from to make sure that the students were thinking critically about the reading process." The higher-performing Elementary School C did not receive a reading specialist from the central office but already had a curriculum specialist on staff,

**After several years of high stakes accountability, there was an apparent acceptance at the school level of the reality of operating under daily pressure to improve student achievement.**

paid for from School C's budget. This principal had attended one of the central office's 2002 summer professional development institutes and felt she had received sufficient information on the initiative to communicate with School C teachers.

### Low-Performing Schools

The principals in this study's lower-performing schools greatly appreciated the help of external partners and probation managers. The probation managers were current and past principals, central office staff, or external consultants. They supervised and coached principals, oversaw the implementation of school improvement plans and budgets, and monitored school progress. The principal of School D, a lower-performing elementary school, attributed the school's successful effort to be removed from probationary status to central office support. Noting the difficulty of doing classroom observations due to time constraints, the principal welcomed the two staff members provided by the external partner to work in classrooms with a

core group of teachers. According to the School D principal, the feedback on teacher performance by these personnel "validated" some of her concerns over the quality of instruction at her school.

The principal of School E, the high school still on probation at the time of this study, appreciated the external partner's "practical ways" of dealing with classroom issues. School E's principal also spoke highly of CPS's High School Redesign materials because these provided a "blueprint" for the redesign of their school into small learning communities. The principal of the moderately-improving High School A acknowledged a good relationship with its probation manager, a former deputy superintendent in the school system, whom the school was allowed to select, and who "came in a supportive role." It should be noted that teachers tended to be more skeptical than principals of the external supports provided by the central office. Similar to the view of principals, teachers appreciated assistance in the form of suggestions for "practical" application in the classroom. However, teachers had little appreciation for "more people for us to be accountable to, or more people for us to follow their paperwork."

### Test-Based Accountability

After several years of high stakes accountability, there was an apparent acceptance at the school level of the reality of operating under daily pressure to improve student achievement. Similar to the views of some central

office administrators, sample school principals tended to appreciate the actions of the previous administration, in particular the focus and sense of direction, as a necessary and positive turning point for the system. As the principal of Elementary School C, noted: “We couldn’t go any other way but up. And [the previous administration was] very supportive of that. I think, in general, people had a really good feeling about the last administration, just because there was a mission, you know? Even as lame as that mission was, which was to increase test scores, we knew where we were going. We had some sort of vision.”

It should be noted that this more recent perspective on Chicago’s accountability program was in stark contrast with school-level views at the beginning of the previous administration. Notwithstanding the fact that achievement levels at that time indicated the school system had much work to do, low-performing schools felt that the penalties and sanctions handed out by the former administration, based on a single administration of a standardized test, were punitive and unfair (Allen & Hallett, 1999). At the time of the current study, some principals continued to question the efficacy of the school system’s testing program and the fairness of centralized decisions impacting students and schools based largely on standardized tests. This was particularly the case in those schools in our sample with high proportions of low-income and special needs students. From the principal of High School A:

You have to have something to measure your school by. I think the previous administration’s emphasis was good. But whether it was fair—I can’t say it was fair because you don’t get the same students. Therefore, some schools have to work twice as hard as other schools do.

The strong accountability message delivered during the previous administration continued to resonate at the school level through the schools’ perception of the continuing importance of standardized test scores. As a matter of course, principals and teachers in our sample schools accepted the notion that annual standardized testing was necessary to provide an external benchmark of school efforts and to provide data for the central office to do cross-school comparisons. The principal of School D expressed a commonly held view: “Well, there must be some type of measure to determine what students know and don’t know. And also what’s being taught and what’s not being taught.”

Notably, however, school-level responses also suggested that principals and teachers defined accountability around a different set of priorities than central office administrators, possibly because school-level educators were in closer contact with students. This often led to conflicting goals. Schools had to focus on the abilities, interests, and needs of individual children as well as the requirement of the school system to demonstrate progress. The principal of Elementary School C explained this dual focus:

We are taking tests all the time. We know that we have to live with that throughout our lives. But the emphasis on testing is one that I sometimes question. The day that the children have to take the test is 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.

The message schools heard most clearly from the central office was —*improve test scores*. Principals and teachers in our sample schools believed that the central office’s driving priority was for students to perform at or above national norms in reading and math. According to a teacher at High School A, “It’s almost like a mantra that we hear all the time from the mayor, from the [former] board president to the [former] CEO. We need to increase the scores for the kids on the standardized tests.” The central office’s priority on standardized testing led the principal at Elementary School C to sense “a hidden message” to the schools to emphasize reading and math “at possibly the cost of teaching the other subject areas because reading and math are the two areas that are tested, especially at those benchmark grades.” A teacher at High School E believed that the central office’s priorities were based, to a degree, on looking good in the public eye: “They want to make sure that media at least has a really good sense of how they are working really hard to increase instructional development

and improvement in the schools. But they [also] want to raise test scores. They want to look good on paper.”

## Where Changes are Needed

The most critical school-level reactions to central office initiatives occurred in three areas: professional development, student assessment, and special education.

**Professional Development.** Teachers typically held CPS professional development offerings in low regard. This appraisal cut across all schools in our sample. Generally, teachers felt that CPS’s in-service trainings were of poor quality and not directly useful for their particular instructional purposes. They described a host of problems ranging from facilitators’ lack of preparation to a “one-size-fits-all” approach. As a teacher from Elementary School C explained, “One problem is that they’re delivering the workshop as if I’ve been a teacher for two years, not, you know,

as if I’ve been a teacher for 27 years.” Teachers also expressed reluctance to leave their students for an activity that they perceived, at best, to be not directly relevant to classroom instruction and, at worst, an insult to their professionalism. In terms of constructive solutions to this problem, an Elementary School D teacher suggested:

I really don’t think that enough time and attention is given to what teachers think. We are asked to do this, do that—or *told* [to do something] at times. Sometimes the teachers need to talk. Sometimes we need to let them know we’re having a problem with this; we want to know more about that. Things are just thrown at us. I’d like to try some of these new techniques. But I [also] want to know some results before I go on to the next thing.

**Student Assessment.** There were a number of issues concerning the district’s testing program, with no discernible differences in opinions expressed by higher-performing and lower-performing schools. All were focused on raising test scores, a clear legacy of Chicago’s high stakes accountability climate. The lower-performing schools were working to remove themselves from intervention status. The higher-performing schools were working to make sure that their performance levels did not decline and place them on intervention status. Even though they were compliant with the central office’s testing mandates, teachers described a sense of unrelenting pressure that

affected what and how they taught. Some resented the implication that a student’s low achievement might be a reflection on their teaching.

The high schools were vociferous on issues relating to fairness in testing. Both School E and School A had low-income, minority student populations—one Latino, the other African-American. Both called for the central office to look at gains when calibrating achievement instead of absolute attainment levels. As a teacher from High School E noted:

When you look at the TAP [Tests of Achievement and Proficiency] test, this is all we hear: ‘You are not performing at grade level. We’re going to close your doors. We’re going to fire you. This is your fault. You are a bad teacher.’ And I say—what was the change in the student from when we got them to where they are at now? How did their scores change? Because if there is improvement, then we are doing our jobs.

School A’s principal discussed the need for coherence in the district’s student assessment program, expressing doubt that the central office “had either sat down and thought this thing out the way it should be thought out or brought people to the table to assist with it.” This principal shared the concern of the central office administrator who suggested the need for an overhaul in student assessment practices to serve more as an aid to instruction. The principal noted:

Even though they were compliant with the central office’s testing mandates, teachers described a sense of unrelenting pressure that affected what and how they taught.

We need to continue to look at the Iowa test, but really we should be looking at the rate of gain in the school more than ‘the percent at or above.’ I guess the basic principles are: we want multiple indicators and we want these indicators to be measured.

**Special Education.** Developing adequate capacity to serve children with disabilities was described as a serious challenge by both central office administrators and school personnel. The issue was expressed both in terms of students’ rights and the school district’s obligation to adhere to both the letter and the spirit of the law. CPS’s settlement of the Corey H. law suit against the school district and the State of Illinois, requires that special needs children be educated in the “least restrictive environment.” Students with disabilities must be placed in regular schools or classrooms unless they are unable to progress academically in those settings, even with extra supports (Catalyst, 2002).

Special education student assignments, however, fall more heavily on some schools than others. For example, at High School E, the principal noted that special education students comprised 24-25 percent of the student body. Some teachers expressed their concern that central office dealt with special education strictly as a compliance issue rather than as an instructional priority. An Elementary School C teacher noted: “Special education gets addressed when there’s some violation of Cory H. and somebody’s got to come down here

**Principals and teachers stated that their overriding priority was to help their students achieve, often despite daunting obstacles and challenges.**

from central office. Other than that, you know, it’s swept under the table. They don’t want to hear about it really. They really don’t.”

Regular education teachers expressed frustration at their inability to appropriately respond to the needs of their special needs students. If a student was possibly a true candidate for specialized services, teachers believed that an appropriate and timely response was often compromised by burdensome documentation requirements. To complicate the issue, the central office issued a policy directive to schools telling them to limit their special education referrals. This was in partial response to the pattern of teachers using special education referrals as a classroom management tactic. Along these lines, teachers also complained about the lack of appropriate classroom supports for students already classified as having a disability. When asked what would help, an Elementary School C teacher replied, “That we get more help.” For example, this teacher suggested that if learning disability teachers spent time in the regular classroom working with the same children they pull out for half of the day, “It would be the best of both worlds.”

## School Instructional Leadership Roles

**T**he stated purpose of the 2002 district reorganization was to provide instructional support to schools in carrying out instructional leadership. Across the system, Chicago school leaders were now expected to change core teaching and learning practices.

Principals in our sample listed multiple responsibilities associated with the complex work of school leadership: provide instructional guidance as well as manage the day-to-day school operations; buffer out external pressures that interfere with classroom teaching while at the same time serve as the catalyst for bringing external resources into the school; comply with external policy mandates (e.g., improve teaching practice, increase student learning, raise test scores), while at the same time, craft instructional programs that address the unique learning needs, interests, and skill levels of the school’s student body; and create a climate of support for teachers. Complexity notwithstanding, principals and teachers stated that their overriding priority was to help their students achieve, often despite daunting obstacles and challenges.

## School Strategies to Improve Instruction

Principals and teachers described several approaches they were using to improve instruction: school-wide focus on student outcomes; teacher collaboration and coordination; school-based professional development; data analysis and test preparation; and classroom observations of teaching and learning. We use the following framework of exemplary instructional leadership themes and strategies to discuss these approaches in the sample schools.

### Focus/Vision

**School-wide Focus on Student Outcomes.** Generally, the Chicago Academic Standards and Frameworks provided the structure for CPS schools to craft an instructional program. Schools shaped their own curricula, although the central office mandated that lesson plans refer to the state standards and the Chicago Academic Standards. Low-performing schools were required to use the Structured Curriculum for lesson planning and teaching.

In the sample schools, instructional goals were more often articulated in terms of student outcomes or achievement levels than in terms of instructional quality, that is, *what the schools do* to help students achieve. Nonetheless, each school had shown improvement on standardized tests over the five years leading up to

the study, reflecting a press toward improved student achievement. During the course of this study, the Chicago Reading Framework was introduced to the schools and became a guide for reading instruction.

Each sample school had a strong leader. The two high school principals had similar styles, explicit and firm on expectations for the school. For example, High School E, a school that had been in a turbulent state for years prior to the current principal's

arrival, was being organized into small learning communities. The principal noted, "I took very, very tedious time to work with teachers to set clearly what the expectations would be." A teacher at this school, however, expressed disapproval of the principal's aggressive approach:

There's lots of teachers in this building that have left recently because of the school's administration and the policies that have occurred. In the beginning, when the principal showed up, she said that she was just going to sit and

## Exemplary Instructional Leadership Themes and Strategies

### 1. Focus/Vision: Marriage of clear conception of instruction with intense organizational focus.

- Expectation of commitment across the entire school.
- Consistent implementation of coherent design across classrooms.
- Symbolic acts or statements to reinforce instructional focus.

### 2. Practice Communities: Social context for deepening the work through commitment to instructional focus and improvement across the school.

- Safe environment for instructional innovation.
- Emphasis on shared leadership, collaboration, and communication.
- Creation of a culture of accountability.

### 3. Rearranged Principal Priorities: Bonding more closely with teachers and everyday classroom activities.

- Focus on student work.
- Managing time for instructional emphasis.
- Becoming a supporter and service provider to teachers.

Source: Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001

observe. Then there was this tone of ‘I’m going to make it very difficult for you, the people that I don’t want here in this building.’ She was getting what she wanted.

Similarly, the principals of the highest-performing and the lowest-performing elementary schools—School C and School D—displayed leadership styles which provoked dissatisfaction among some teachers. The principal of Elementary School B, on the other hand, had a more participatory leadership style and expressed an emphasis on teacher autonomy among the faculty. This principal felt as long as student performance was improving, the teachers should have the ability to teach as they pleased. According to one of the teachers at School B:

The principal is into empowerment. So is the assistant principal. They want you to be the best that you can be when you cross that threshold. Here it is. Do it whichever way will improve your students and make them happy. And involve the parents. And raise the scores. If there’s a problem, come to me. Let’s talk about it and we’ll make some changes. But it’s basically up to you.

## Practice Communities

**Teacher Collaboration and Coordination.** There was a lot of activity in the sample schools to help teachers establish habits of working collaboratively on school improvement planning, lesson planning, and professional development activities. To facilitate teacher collaboration around student work, two of the lower-performing schools, School D and School E, hired a staff person especially for the purpose of helping to coordinate teachers’ work on curriculum and instruction matters. A reading specialist for the same purpose had been on staff at the high-performing School C for several years.

After determining that teacher reliance on non-standards-based textbooks was a problem, the school leaders at School B established “collaborative working groups” to focus teachers on standards-based instruction. At the assistant principal’s behest, the collaborative working groups met weekly for 30 minutes at the beginning of the school day to “group the standards together [so that they would] flow sequentially.” The project eventually bogged down in minutiae, the teachers “got soured on it” and it was tabled. Although upon reflection, the assistant principal believed that this initiative was unsuitable for initiating a collaborative teacher effort, he also expressed a continuing need at his school for staff development on standards-based instruction.

Teacher collaboration at School C occurred on a more voluntary basis. The principal noted, “It just helps, you know, to be with another grade-level teacher. It hasn’t happened through all the grades, but every year it seems to just pick up a little bit more.” This principal, however, required regular cluster meetings of teachers at the early childhood, primary, intermediate, and upper levels in addition to their more sporadic voluntary efforts. At these meetings, the principal pointedly asked the teachers how they addressed specific instructional matters.

As part of a strategy to remove his school from probation status, the principal at High School A determined that all of the school’s departments had to work together interdepartmentally and intradepartmentally “in order to get the best out of their youngsters.” A weekly reading task force was one of the collaborative structures at School A:

We came up with working together as English 1 teachers, English 2 teachers, English 3 teachers. What they do is sit down and cover ‘main idea’ this week; next week, ‘comparison and contrast.’ Another week, [we cover] another skill, as mandated by the system. What we have to do is prepare for the eventuality—that’s the test.

Similarly, the principal at School D described a number of meetings that occurred regularly at her school. This school leader estimated that 80-85 percent of the teachers (out of a faculty of roughly 75) were new teachers, having taught less than five years. As teacher turnover was a problem system-wide in low-performing schools, part of the challenge at School D, according to the principal, was having “teachers who were brand new to basically be on the same page as the whole school system, as far as teaching to the curriculum.”

A believer in small schools, School E’s principal thought her entire school needed to be reorganized to provide a more supportive instructional environment. Along those lines, the principal organized the freshman class into small learning communities, five “cores” of approximately 125 students, grouped around four core teachers: English, math, science, and social studies. The teachers in each core met weekly for 45 minutes to discuss student issues, content issues, or cross-curricular projects. According to the principal, “Conversations can happen about teaching and learning in small learning communities.” The intent was for students to remain in the small learning communities throughout high school, beginning with each freshman class. School E applied to participate in the school district’s small high schools’ initiative but was not selected for the first round.

“We decided to get together as a team and develop our own staff development activities, rather than bringing some folks in from the outside.”

**School-Based Professional Development.** Schools conducted their school-based professional development activities generally every few weeks on half-days accumulated by banking time. Activities included School C’s participation in the Chicago Systemic Initiative, staff development conducted by the curriculum specialist at School D, and a peer-to-peer strategy of encouraging faculty members to demonstrate their skills to each other at High School A. According to the principal at High School A:

I’ve always maintained that a staff is talented, and because they are talented, we need to use those talents. They are diamonds in the rough—people who go to faculty meetings and won’t say a word. We decided to get together as a team and develop our own staff development activities, rather than bringing some folks in from the outside.

### **Data Analysis and Test Preparation.**

Principals and teachers discussed their efforts to prepare their students for spring testing. Some of the schools’ practices consisted of grouping students (with the implication that those closest to the target of meeting national norms would get the most assistance) and frequent testing of students in the standardized test formats. According to a teacher at High School A, their efforts aimed “to get the kids focused on the big picture for the spring. We start in the fall, and it’s all geared toward the spring.” At this school, teachers from the English department worked with teachers from the social studies department to devise joint activities for their students. The math and science teachers also worked together. The students were tested every five weeks.

The teacher at High School A felt a big part of the test preparation effort was to get the students to understand the different types of questions appearing on the test as well as to build their vocabulary and higher-order thinking skills: “You know, a lot of times, a kid may understand what they’ve read. But they get to a question, and either it’s worded in a way that they can’t get the inference, or there’s a word in the question they don’t understand. And if you don’t understand, particularly if it’s a key word, it can throw off your whole answer.”

At Elementary School D, students were tested weekly to monitor their learning. The principal noted, “If they’re not exposed, when it’s time for the yearly exam that determines the fate of everything, then we’re not doing our jobs.” The principal advised that the weekly assessments addressed higher-order thinking skills and required students to write out answers completely. The principal explained, “Whether it’s fair or not, we can’t change the state test. And we cannot change the CPS assessment instrument, the Iowa. The bottom line is we can’t change it. So we will have to do everything that we can to make sure that the students are successful.”

CPS schools receive their test score data from the central office. At the beginning of the school year, it is standard practice for schools to look at their test score data from the previous year’s spring testing. According to the principal of School D, “We’re constantly in dialogue with central office in terms of disaggregating the test data, in terms of how students are grouped, what students we need to target, in terms of students that will be able to make the greatest gain, and how we will be able to move our scores up.” Elementary School B also reviewed the test score data provided by central office to identify areas of weakness in student performance, giving students practice tests with old tests provided by the central office, and also utilizing retired teachers, paid for by the central office, to help tutor students before spring testing. The principal of High School A said

teachers there had the process of analyzing test scores “down to a science,” and followed up by working on the areas of strength and weakness identified by test data. Prior to the central office’s cancellation of one of its exams, there were three sets of test score data for high schools to review. The principal at High School A described the experience of analyzing these data: “It has you jumping as if you were on a roller coaster.”

### **Rearranging Principal Priorities**

***Classroom Observations.*** Principals and assistant principals in our sample schools reported that they increased classroom observations at the behest of the central office. As a result, classrooms were becoming more transparent zones of interaction between teachers and students. The principal at School C noted that she was required to submit quarterly reports on classroom teacher observations along with samples of a student’s work. At School D, the principal, assistant principal, curriculum specialist, and head teacher went into classrooms to observe. This was in addition to the external partner who coached and modeled lessons with the teachers. Higher-performing schools were also required to do classroom observations, although without the assistance of an external partner.

Although their styles varied, all of the principals placed a priority on observing instruction. The principal

**Principals and assistant principals in our sample schools reported that they increased classroom observations at the behest of the central office.**

of School C noted that her manner of observing was to tune in to whether the teachers were asking questions to develop students’ higher-order thinking skills. A teacher at School B noted that the principal of her school “goes and sits at the back of the room. Or he’ll just walk around the perimeter of the room to listen, to see what’s going on. And he’ll ask you at that time, is there anything I can do for you? If the answer’s no, he’s on his way. If the answer is yes, he’ll take the time to listen and write down what your needs are, and get back to you.” In fact, this teacher noted that both the principal and the assistant principal were “always around.” At High School A, the principal asked the assistant principals, counselors, attendance officer, and disciplinarian to go into selected classrooms to assist the teachers. And the School E principal, eschewing the CPS classroom monitoring checklist, instead looked at how classrooms were arranged and noted the “positive things teachers do that help support teaching and learning.”

## Summary of Issues and Suggestions

### Policy Churn

Policy changes that accompanied turnover in top district leadership created dislocations at both the central office and schools. School effects included cynical “wait and see” attitudes and lack of commitment of effort. Central office effects included discontinuity in service provision to schools and mixed messages from unaligned department units. Structures and resources to coordinate and integrate central-level services are needed to minimize the damaging effects of policy churn.

### Instructional Support

Schools appreciated tools that were practical aids to instruction, helped to focus and structure their work, and did not add to their burden. Schools needed a system that “listened” to schools, supported schools in being internally and externally accountable, and provided schools with appropriate tools to shape instructional programs that address their student needs and interests.

### Professional Development

CPS’s research-based professional development principles provided the framework for creating effective, high-quality professional development for teachers and administrators. Following these principles, professional development resources should be coordinated in ways that support

coherent instructional programs at individual schools. Professional development efforts should respond to teacher needs over their career spans and closely align with state certification requirements.

### Assessment

Schools believed that the emphasis on testing was misplaced and disproportionately punitive, especially as student populations became increasingly diverse—racially, ethnically, culturally, economically, academically, and linguistically. Although cognizant of the purposes of standardized testing, principals and teachers continued to question the usefulness and fairness of a system of student assessment that they believed largely served non-instructional purposes. There were opportunities to change the system under new federal law, but it will take political courage to establish a system of instructionally-supportive assessment.

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### Data

Data formats supported test preparation. Data also need to support teacher reflection, analysis, and re-teaching efforts. The central office should make information available to schools in user-friendly formats. The central office also should re-invigorate its research and evaluation unit and look at system performance as a whole and disaggregated in terms of trends over time.

### Special Education

As special education presently was constituted in Chicago, it was often difficult to tell the extent to which a student’s learning difficulties were due to a disability or to inadequate teaching and instructional support. The risks of mislabeling students were high. There were not enough classroom resources to accommodate the mandate for inclusion. There were also disproportionate assignments of special needs students to certain schools.

## Concluding Thoughts on the Central Office and Systemic Reform

### Uniformity

There appeared to be striking uniformity of instructional strategies among the sample schools. The schools appeared to be complying with central office policies without much adaptation to individual school contexts. This suggested a strong centralized presence, even though Chicago was a decentralized system. To illustrate this point, the principals of the highest and lowest-performing elementary schools in our sample described their role in terms of carrying out central office policies:

This chair is not a popular one. So even though we try to work together in everything, some of my directives are questioned, and, of course, why not, you know? My directives are coming from someplace else.

Teachers don't understand the system. Many individuals think that schools run themselves, that decisions that I make are my decisions. They're not my decisions. And I constantly have to remind staff that I have a boss. I have several bosses.

One interpretation of the observed uniformity is that a strong accountability footprint still shaped Chicago school activities. It is questionable whether there is sufficient "psychological space" to create a safe environment for teachers to risk moving away from centrally-approved practices.

### Isolation

Teachers appeared to be isolated from conversations and decision-making regarding instructional policies and practices. A few teachers noted that on occasion they might volunteer to participate on a specific project which extended beyond their classroom or school. These occasions usually coincided with special funding to undertake such a project, often from a private source. On the whole, however, teachers lacked the benefit of regular, ongoing professional conversations about instruction with their peers and the opportunity to participate in decision-making that affected their practice. Moreover, the teachers in the field study schools only "knew" central office remotely: from the information conveyed to them by their principals; through instructional materials, such as the Structured Curriculum; through offsite professional development workshops; or through their external partners, if they were on probation. According to one teacher at High School A:

My interaction is zero. No one from anyplace higher than this building has been in my classroom or anything. I've never talked to anyone. So that's all I can tell you. Just from what I hear from the principal, I know, as a matter of fact, that he has high interaction with the central office. Information is disseminated down to us. But as far as myself—zero.

### Paradoxes and Cautions

The work of systemic reform contains an inherent tension between bureaucracy/centralized policy making on the one hand and school autonomy/professional discretion on the other

Teachers appeared to be isolated from conversations and decision-making regarding instructional policies and practices.

(Cohen & Spillane, 1992). A paradox is that the thrust of systemic reform requires schools to undergo dramatic transformation in content, pedagogy, and organization to achieve envisioned changes in classroom instruction with limited capacities currently available to accomplish such a transformation. Moreover, a coordinated and aligned system of instructional guidance calls for greater centralized controls, thereby reducing local school autonomy. Yet we know that for school improvement to be sustained, it must grow organically and be owned by the local school. The "human factor" is part of this paradox, namely, that it is teachers who must change in order to realize the goals of new instructional policies. Although teachers are the most important agents of instructional policy, ironically, they typically are the least invested in contemplated change (Cohen, 1991).

In a decentralized school district undertaking systemic reform, the central office must achieve a balance in providing appropriate instructional resources and tools, but not so much structure and oversight that schools hesitate to take the risks of innovation needed to develop a sound educational program. Efforts to provide a coherent system of instructional guid-

ance may over-reach in attempting to support what schools do, especially if the resources are not sufficient to the task. Well-meaning efforts to achieve instructional program coherence will then be implemented in ways that impose uniformity and standardization on complex school environments. Teachers need to have opportunities to raise legitimate questions about the efficacy of selected methods or programs so they are better prepared to meet the challenge of serving their students' diverse needs and interests.

In its third phase of reform, the Chicago Public Schools has provided a number of instructional tools and resources to schools. However, the conformity observed in the field raises questions about the extent to which these forms of support ultimately will help schools to help themselves. Teachers in the sample schools offered the following constructive suggestions for how the central office can build needed capacity:

- Provide student performance data in useful ways and help schools use data differently.
- Facilitate school-to-school connections that would include making time for conversations about instruction.
- Change the way student assessment is done so it is more of an aid to instruction.
- See students' special needs not as a stigma but as a resource for improving instruction.
- Truly get input from teachers and actually use it.

The Chicago Public Schools has taken important initial steps to support system-wide instructional improve-

ment, in line with the imperative for systemic reform. We suggest that further efforts to build instructional capacity system-wide could be facilitated by an interactive and dynamic relationship between the central office and the schools. We encourage the development of reciprocal and mutually supportive approaches that afford schools the autonomy needed for the development of instructionally responsive programs and that also meet the requirements of public accountability.

In particular, we would urge expanded central office support for emerging school-based efforts to support teacher collaboration and coordination. To ensure that ongoing, deep conversations about instruction are facilitated on a sustained basis, communities of professional practice should be embedded in the daily life of schools. This would require substantive changes in school organization and different frameworks of accountability to allow teachers to build these professional relationships and to genuinely invest in instructional improvement. There would also need to be substantive changes in order for principals to provide the kinds of support and leadership needed to facilitate communities of professional practice at all Chicago Public Schools.

Finally, a teacher offers this advice to central office: *Learn from schools. Have the courage to let schools try new things when they are proposed. You never know what it will do for the system.*

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## Case Study

# The Milwaukee Public Schools

by Eric Osthoff and Paula White

## Introduction

Two strands of activity were evident in every aspect of reform in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). The first strand consisted of initiatives designed and deployed to *directly* impact instruction—what is taught, learned, and assessed. The second strand emphasized matters of organizational structure and capacity. Initiatives in the second strand were undertaken based on the expectation that they could ultimately lead to higher performance by schools, teachers, and students relative to academic achievement. However, their effects were understood to be *indirect* and, typically, non-specific in nature. Non-specific refers to capacity-building reform initiatives that were expected to encourage good teaching and learning

generally, without necessarily producing higher achievement in any particular content domain. The second strand of activities was viewed as a means to the ends codified in the first strand. This report distinguishes between the two strands of reform activity in each subsection, noting where initiatives fall specifically into one or the other, or encompass aspects of both.

An important piece of the puzzle in understanding the tension between direct and indirect initiatives and why the latter often took center stage pertains to the relationship between the state and the district. On one hand, the state created programs (P-5 [preschool to grade 5] and SAGE [Student Achievement Guarantee in Education]) that provided extra financial support to MPS, especially for schools serving large proportions of low-income students. On the other hand, the state implemented the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MCPC), enabling thousands of students from the MPS attendance area to enroll in non-MPS schools—taking with them the state aid that otherwise might well have flowed to MPS. The MCPC only exacerbated MPS loss of student market share to suburban and private schools, including numerous charter schools authorized by the state and operated by the City of Milwaukee and area institutions of higher education.

The great importance district leadership attached to stemming enrollment declines was reflected in the MPS strategic plan (March 28, 2000). As shown below, the plan's mission statements placed maintaining students in the system on the same level as enabling students to achieve academically, to continue on to higher education, and to succeed in the workplace.

### Mission

The Milwaukee Public Schools will ensure that maximum educational opportunities are provided for all students to reach their highest potential so that:

1. Students achieve their educational and employment goals, and
2. Parents choose the Milwaukee Public Schools to educate their children.

### Goals

The goals of the Milwaukee Public Schools are to improve:

1. Student achievement.
2. Student success in further education and employment.
3. Family satisfaction, as measured by their choices in the education marketplace.



## Recent History of the District's Role in Instructional Reform

**T**his study relies heavily on interviews conducted from spring 2001 to spring 2002 with 21 central office and 70 school staff at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. In addition, this study relies on observation data from district-level meetings, school-level meetings, as well as meetings involving both district and school level staff. Interview and observation data focused primarily on reform initiatives then underway in MPS. Past initiatives that were no longer active were occasionally explored since they were integral to veteran employees' understanding of the relationship between central office and schools and how this affected instruction. Throughout this report, we aim for balance in the amount of background information provided regarding district policies and practices, to make the report as useful as possible to readers familiar, as well as those unfamiliar, with the district.

### Role of School Board and Superintendents

Most district and school staff viewed the MPS school board as the central player in the policy and reform arena. Interviewees frequently cited additional parties (e.g., the teachers union, state government, business community, parents, and media) as

*This fluidity in board leadership led to a high turnover rate of district superintendents. Whenever board leadership changed, the ascendant group often hired a new superintendent to advance an alternative vision or initiatives.*

having substantial effects on board decisions. However, the board was perceived as taking into account the disparate forces and formulating basic goals and strategies to guide district staff members. When relating prior developments in reform initiatives, interviewees routinely described the board as having played a strong role in selecting initiatives and making important design and implementation decisions.

Respondents often viewed superintendents and their boards as having highly overlapping roles, objectives, and strategies for reform. The extent to which respondents distinguished between boards and superintendents generally correlated with a respondent's role in the system. Central office staff frequently referred to boards and superintendents when describing reform initiatives, and central office staff regularly noted

policy differences among superintendents and boards. Principals referred to boards and superintendents regularly when discussing instructional policy and reform, though principals referred to such leaders far less often than did central office staff. Principals were also less likely than central office staff members to distinguish between superintendents and boards when characterizing central office effects on instruction. Teachers referred to boards and superintendents least often, and frequently made no distinction between the two.

Below, we identify specific district initiatives that interviewees considered to have both direct and indirect effects on instruction. First, however, it is important to recognize an overall perception of district leadership encountered in interviews. From the perspective of most central office and school staff respondents, local education politics had been highly contested for many years prior to our study. The general consensus was that the school board was deeply divided into two main factions, often locked in a 5-4 split in board seats held, with a slim margin of control moving periodically from one side to the other. According to interviewees, this fluidity in board leadership led to a high turnover rate of district superintendents. Whenever board leadership changed, the ascendant group often hired a new superintendent to advance an alternative vision or initiatives.

We do not attempt to review all the details of the boards and superintendents here. However, we identify district and school respondents' perceptions of how this environment shaped district efforts to implement activities expected to have both direct and indirect effects on instruction. Throughout this document, we provide comments from respondents that give first-hand accounts of our findings.

A mid-level central office manager provided a descriptive summary of the disruptions associated with fluctuating board leadership:

...a superintendent needs to have a vision and goals and objectives and strategies to reach those [goals] that are very clearly laid out to central services people [and] to school administrators. Very clearly articulated. And then as we all together march forward to accomplish these [goals], that this communication continues so that everybody knows what's happening and they're on the same page. That vision of mine has not occurred to the degree that I would professionally like it to happen for several reasons. One is the turnover in superintendents and consequently the turnover in deputies who work with [a given superintendent]. So every time you get a new person in, you're spending time bringing that person up to speed about all of the logistics of doing things.

A principal described the situation this way:

I think the last seven, eight, nine years we've had a very large amount of turnover on the board, and every instance has been a new superintendent to the point of less than the national average of three years. With every new superintendent, the new board's agenda has always been a major reshuffling and focus. Because of that, we just start on certain initiatives—and here's where I don't fault [central office staff]—and they get rolling with it, about to implement it, and then bang, we've got another superintendent.

A learning coordinator gave his take:<sup>4</sup>

For a while, we were changing superintendents like people change socks. . . . They come in and they [say], 'Well, this is the initiative, and this is the way we're going,' and they run down that path for a while. Then, the board gets disenchanted with that, or they change board members.

A school implementer gave hers:

The staff has been through a lot of stuff in the last five to 10 years, some people are burned out by it.... The reality is we just had new school board members elected and changes in accountability measures and standardized tests. Once these two school board members were elected, we realized there would be a shift and we would have more

changes. The teachers realized that they have to be careful as to how much they buy into the changes. The young teachers are real open to it because they're new; they're still naïve and open to getting involved.

And, from a teacher's perspective:

But when we got the different school board members elected, then sometimes some of these things change. You know, you get another president of the school board or the whole direction of the school board changes, and then some of these initiatives get dropped and they go on, move on, to something else.

As observed by the individuals quoted above, continuous change prevailed in terms of district impact on schools. Veteran district employees easily cited major changes in their own roles as a result of changes associated with board and superintendent turnover. In our study, we focused on instructional policy and practice in place at the time of our fieldwork. For this reason, many accounts of district impact pertained to policies and practices persisting at that moment in time. Undoubtedly, many initiatives were not identified since they had been launched and/or abandoned before our study started. The accounts we received might give the impression that district instructional policy and practices were fairly stable. To be fully understood, such impressions need to be balanced with the perceptions conveyed in the preceding quotes.

## Direct Versus Indirect Impacts on Instructional Improvement

In surveying specific district initiatives identified by interviewees as affecting instruction, respondents made a clear distinction between direct and indirect impacts.

**Direct Impacts.** Initiatives often cited by MPS staff, and especially by school staff members, as having a direct impact on instructional improvement included:

- District standards
- District proficiencies
- District performance assessments
- District standardized assessments
- District balanced assessments
- District literacy initiative (including district-mandated literacy coaches for all schools)
- Professional development and technical support services (especially from the Department of Educational Services varies widely by school)

A general view expressed prominently in our interviews was that district leadership in recent years was more focused on the indirect than the direct realm.

**Indirect Impacts.** Initiatives often cited by MPS staff, and especially by school staff members, as having an indirect impact on teaching and learning included:

- Controlled (i.e. within-district) school choice
- Neighborhood schools initiative (including emphasis on K-8 schools; community involvement)
- Decentralization, including:
  - Reorganization of central office divisions such as Educational Services
  - Buyback and chargeback initiatives, and increased emphasis on school site-based budgeting
- Capacity-building for instructional leadership (including leadership specialists, Principal Academies, and Institutes)
- Education Plans (i.e., guidance for school improvement planning)
- Extension of authority to schools to interview and hire own staff in collaboration with Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association (MTEA)
- Teacher Evaluation and Mentoring Program (TEAM), in collaboration with MTEA

In addition, some state programs that MPS did not directly administer were nonetheless cited as having extensive impact on the district. Especially frequently-mentioned, state-administered programs included:

- SAGE (Student Achievement Guarantee in Education) program
- P-5 (preschool to grade 5) program

- Wisconsin State Assessment System: Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam (WKCE); Wisconsin Reading Comprehension Test (WRCT)
- Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (students may attend, at no charge, private sectarian and nonsectarian schools located in the city of Milwaukee)

A general view expressed prominently in our interviews was that district leadership in recent years was more focused on the indirect than the direct realm. The following excerpts illustrate this perspective from central office and school staff members:

From a central office staff member:

When [name of a former superintendent] was superintendent, we lost people. One of the things he did was downsize central services and the first thing to go was all of the support staff in Curriculum and Instruction. And those were the people who were out in the schools working with the teachers.... And as we have started to decentralize the budgets, it's just so interesting because one of the things the schools ask for from Curriculum and Instruction is the ability to have someone out working with them. And when you only have one curriculum specialist [per subject area]...we don't have the capacity to be out there in the schools like they're requesting and like we would want to. I think this is a holdover from 10 years ago and they've

forgotten that these people aren't there anymore.... One person just can't physically service all of the schools. And [central office staff] end up doing all of this central coordination and paperwork . . . and then running workshops and in-services. So that's the kind of interaction that they end up having with the schools, more so than being directly out in the classrooms. . . .

From a principal:

Principals don't know where [the superintendent] stands.... The [superintendent] really cares about larger structural issues, and when you looked at him as a principal, he did a lot of innovative things about restructuring. He didn't have a real core academic agenda when he was principal, and he hasn't had a core academic agenda as superintendent. In fact, his big thing is decentralization.... There needs to be some kind of clear direction, some kind of philosophy of learning that informs the district.

From a teacher whose comments represent many teachers' views:

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.... I think that at the level of the superintendent and his immediate squadron, that they think they're on a track to reorganize the neighborhood school system...reorganize the places that learning is delivered.

## District Initiatives

**School Choice.** Though the pressure to maintain enrollment in MPS was intense during our study, it had been an emphasis in the district for many years. Interviewees perceived manifestations of such pressure in many district initiatives, past and present. For example, some years before our study, the district overhauled district attendance areas and rules. We did not collect detailed information on the original rules of the controlled choice initiative, but we did collect descriptions of the status of important district policies at the time of our fieldwork. This included a system whereby the district was divided into six attendance regions—five in relatively coherent geographic regions, and one that included geographically scattered specialty schools.

Though the pressure to maintain enrollment in MPS was intense during our study, it had been an emphasis in the district for many years.

**Student Assignment.** At the time of our data collection, student assignment involved a complex process that gave students and parents considerable input in choosing schools. Students were invited to apply to a limited number of specialty schools serving students citywide, or to identify up to three prioritized choices among the schools in their attendance region. Schools would then choose among qualifying students by lottery, if demand exceeded capacity. Depending on the region, this gave elementary students a minimum of 17 attendance area schools and 10 citywide schools to choose from, knowing the district would provide transportation if admitted. Students were free to apply to any school if they could provide their own transportation. According to respondents, the controlled choice initiative was a district response to competitive pressure for students then being generated by various actual and proposed state choice programs, charter schools, and private school competition.

**Decentralization.** As part of broad reform, a former superintendent maintained controlled choice while also implementing a major decentralization initiative. The decentralization initiative was based on the belief that MPS schools as a whole would compete more effectively and provide students with higher-quality education if school leaders were given greater decision-making authority and enhanced resources previously

dedicated to central office staff and functions. Earlier, we related how a central office manager in Educational Services described the impact of the decentralization initiative overseen by the same former superintendent on the capacity of that department to work with schools individually. The quote below depicts a Finance Department mid-level manager's understanding of how decentralization under the same former superintendent shifted substantial budget authority from central office to schools:

1991 was the biggest change we had as far as decentralization [of the budget]. The schools were given an allocation and they were to determine their budget based on that allocation. Bottom-line control. Period.... After 1991, it was blown wide open. That would be the biggest change that happened on the budget side.

The controlled choice initiative, central office restructuring, and transfer of budget authority to schools had many lasting effects that remained salient during our study. For example, at the time our study began, a district administrator told us that well over 80 percent of all students in the district were being bused at district expense. This was largely a function of allowing students greater latitude to choose schools as a strategy for attracting and maintaining enrollment. According to the district administrator, the financial

**“The district used to push bus rides as the ticket to equal educational opportunity. Now the district was going to push neighborhood schools as the way.”**

burden of busing large numbers of students contributed to a district decision in 1999 to introduce the Neighborhood Schools Initiative. This initiative was promoted on numerous grounds, including enhancement of the instructional delivery system in schools district-wide and a substantial savings to be realized from reduced transportation costs.

The district borrowed approximately \$100 million dollars in state-secured bonds to pay for capital costs of upgrading buildings to house the K-8 neighborhood schools. The strategy for covering the bonds was to use the approximately \$10-20 million a year in saved busing costs. The district gave students living closest to neighborhood schools priority in the student assignment process and used enhanced funding and physical plant upgrades to make neighborhood schools as attractive as possible. The fact that the district contin-

ued to allow students to opt out of their neighborhood schools shows how important the choice idea had become in the community. To paraphrase an upper-level district administrator we interviewed, “The district used to push bus rides as the ticket to equal educational opportunity. Now the district was going to push neighborhood schools as the way.” At every turn with the new initiative, the district encountered persisting effects of previous initiatives.

## District Challenges

Persisting effects of previous initiatives were evident in all aspects of central office and school staff members' roles and activities and served to shape interactions among staff at the two levels. With federal oversight, the state also used standardized test scores to evaluate school performance relative to the requirements of Title I and other federal programs. Prior to the introduction of the federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation, which occurred late in active data collection for this study, the frequency and magnitude of Title I penalties for poor test performance was relatively low.

The federal government dramatically increased stakes around standardized test scores in *No Child Left Behind*, which elevated the emphasis on standardized test scores and reduced emphasis on performance assessment, proficiencies, and grades in the Educational Plan Template.

The tacit logic of district reform is evident in the following illustrative list of rolling and interwoven district

challenges and responses. This list of district challenges is neither exhaustive nor chronological. Rather, it is a

sampling of complex and interrelated challenges as viewed from the central office perspective.

**Table 1. District Challenges and Reform Responses**

District Challenge	District Response
MPS faces market share pressure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Create controlled choice, specialty and magnet schools, busing.</li> <li>■ Foster exceptional schools through decentralization of budget and instructional programs.</li> </ul>
MPS faces increased market pressure, coupled with rising pressure from community, state, and federal government to reduce achievement disparities between schools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Increase proportion of high-quality neighborhood schools in district, making more schools competitive in marketplace and equalizing opportunity.</li> <li>■ Foster local school excellence through further decentralization.</li> </ul>
School performance and attractiveness varies too widely.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Revise Education Plan (school improvement) template to increase standardization of school strategic planning, budgeting, and instructional goals.</li> <li>■ Intensify principal monitoring, support, and guidance (leadership specialists and the Leadership Institutes).</li> <li>■ Build district capacity to make a base level of services available to all schools though chargeback and buyback.</li> </ul>
School instructional quality and performance varies greatly, and schools too preoccupied with non-instructional issues and functions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Roll out district-wide instructional initiatives (e.g., proficiencies, performance assessment, and literacy).</li> <li>■ Increase emphasis on measures of student performance (e.g., standardized test scores, satisfaction of proficiencies, performance assessment scores, attendance, and grades).</li> </ul>
Federal government dramatically increases stakes around standardized test scores with <i>No Child Left Behind</i> legislation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Elevate emphasis on standardized test scores and reduce emphasis on performance assessment, proficiencies, and grades in Education Plan Template.</li> <li>■ Intensify emphasis on Literacy Initiative as strategy for increasing student success on reading-intensive standardized tests.</li> </ul>

## District Instructional Initiatives

This section expands on the major district initiatives, including their key features, perceived intended impacts on instruction, and the various staff members' theories of change as to the processes and mechanisms through which the initiatives were expected to form new attitudes, beliefs, or practices. This section focuses primarily on the *intended* outcomes and the theory of change that the initiatives embodied. Additional information about initiatives as *actually* implemented and experienced by central office and school staff follows in subsequent sections. Initiatives intended to have direct impacts on instruction are considered first.

### District Initiatives Designed for Direct Effects on Instruction

**District Standards.** The manner in which MPS district officials approached creating district content standards demonstrates how the district anticipated pending state policy initiatives and acted on matters in advance of the state, often going beyond what was eventually required by the state.

MPS began drafting district standards in 1994, partly in anticipation of the development of state standards and a state mandate requiring districts to formulate local standards aligned

The manner in which MPS district officials approached creating district content standards demonstrates how the district anticipated pending state policy initiatives and acted on matters in advance of the state, often going beyond what was eventually required by the state.

to those of the state. MPS standards were first produced in draft form in 1996 and adopted in January 1997. The state developed its own model standards in December 1997, mandating that districts establish local standards aligned to the state standards. MPS commenced with appropriate revisions, culminating in the *Milwaukee Public Schools K-12 Academic Standards and Grade Level Expectations* (November 1998). In addition to being aligned to the state standards, the MPS standards were designed to reflect then current standards of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

Whereas the Wisconsin state standards were anchored on benchmark grades 4, 8, and 12, MPS provided standards for all grade levels in all subject areas addressed in the local

standards. The 1998 MPS content standards addressed Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. For each subject, 55-70 pages of text were provided, followed by hundreds of standards organized by grade level and subject area content strand.

For example, the MPS mathematics standards identified the objective of students to be able to make connections among mathematical ideas, solve problems, reason mathematically, communicate mathematically, and use technology in mathematics to succeed in math content strands related to mathematical processes, algebraic reasoning, geometry and measurement, numeracy, and probability and statistics.

As noted above, MPS grade-level content standards were numerous. For the mathematical processes strand, for example, a survey of the number of constituent standards ranged between 10 and 35 per grade level for kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The average number of standards per grade level for the mathematical processes strand was 18 or greater. The examples below convey the general format of the standards in the processes strand for 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

By the end of Grade 4, students will be able to:

- Distinguish between geometric patterns and random designs
- Make conjectures about factors of 100
- Partition large numbers to multiply them more easily (e.g.,  $24 \times 8$  is thought of as  $20 \times 8 + 4 \times 8$ )<sup>5</sup>

Although the district standards were first expected to be state-mandated, and eventually were, mid-level district central office staff expressed support for the standards, based on the belief that the standards would serve to improve teaching and learning. Central office staff as well as school staff expressed the view that in recent years, the district had very little central control of curriculum and instruction. This had led to a situation whereby teaching and learning varied greatly across schools. High teacher and student mobility rates exacerbated variation. Central office staff members believed that standards could potentially be used as an effective strategy for clarifying the aims and content of instruction to provide all students with access to reasonably consistent instruction on a range of content.

Below, a quote from a central office administrator in Educational Services characterized district efforts to use standards as a curriculum guidance tool to regain consistency in district instructional practices:

I've seen the curriculum pendulum go from one end to the other to where everything's totally dictated and then we went to a point where you could do anything you wanted to do. Well, with a 25-30 percent mobility rate, that's not all that good for children. So we're at a point now where we're trying to at least align our curriculum, our standards and our goals, and expectations. We also want ... assessments that we feel are actually designed to actually assess certain standards.

The proficiencies, in theory, were to increase instructional quality and student learning by bringing greater clarity and consistency to academic expectations.

**District Proficiencies.** Through the years, state political leaders, community leaders, and the media have frequently characterized MPS as a system with low academic expectations and standards for students. Partly to counter this perception, the district board, in 1997, adopted a new set of high school graduation requirements and proficiency requirements for 8<sup>th</sup> grade promotion.<sup>6</sup> When implemented for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade class of 2000, the initiative specified curricular content on which students would be required to demonstrate proficiency. The initiative also promised a district commitment to provide challenging and reliable rubrics for assessing student performance. Upon implementation, the board adopted a policy dictating that no student would be promoted from 8<sup>th</sup> grade to 9<sup>th</sup> grade without meeting the proficiencies.

The proficiencies, in theory, were to increase instructional quality and student learning by bringing

greater clarity and consistency to academic expectations. They would also increase teacher and student accountability for student performance. This would ensure that students would enter 9<sup>th</sup> grade better prepared to succeed with high school work and meet graduation requirements.

By 1999, the district identified proficiencies in four subject areas to hold the 8<sup>th</sup> grade class of 2000 accountable: (1) Communications, (2) Mathematics, (3) Science, and (4) Research. The four areas were then divided into three sub-areas. The district created four-point rubrics for scoring student work in each area and stipulated that a score of "3" or higher would be needed for acceptable performance on a given proficiency. Students would be required to perform acceptably on two of the three sub-areas in each subject to meet proficiency overall and qualify for 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

Though the district proficiencies were developed at about the same time that the district was working to devise new district standards, no evidence was available to identify whether these two sets of activities were directly coordinated or aligned (see Clune, Mason, Pohs, Theil, & White, April 2, 2002).

The decision by Milwaukee Public Schools to introduce proficiencies was another example of MPS amplification of state policy initiatives. The decision by MPS to develop and

implement the proficiencies came shortly after the state enacted a new law calling for a high-stakes graduation test, and a prohibition on automatic promotion for 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students, but well before scheduled implementation of the state law. The state graduation test initiative was subsequently postponed indefinitely.

**Performance, Standardized, and Balanced Assessments.** MPS developed and implemented a system of performance assessments at about the same time as the proficiency system. Initially, the performance assessments were created and scored by the district. Budget cuts at central office later resulted in the transfer of the responsibility of scoring the performance assessments to the school level. Performance assessments represented an effort by the district to motivate teachers and students to pursue in-depth conceptual learning around academic content. The assessments consisted of constructed response items that required students to communicate their thinking in greater depth and detail than traditional multiple choice assessment items. Performance assessment items typically took the form of real-life problems that required students to

apply their academic content knowledge. The decision was made to score the assessments centrally to increase the chances for reliable and consistent criteria to evaluate the success of students acquiring skills to solve complex problems. Performance assessments and the proficiencies were based on many of the same content standards and curricular objectives. Consequently, performance assessments at 8<sup>th</sup> grade were added to portfolios and standardized tests as a method for students to demonstrate knowledge needed to satisfy district proficiencies.

Standardized assessments required by the state included the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam (WKCE) and Wisconsin Reading Comprehension Test (WRCT). The state required districts to administer the WKCE, covering reading, mathematics, language, science, and social studies at grades 4, 8, and 10. The WRCT was required at grade 3. In 2000-01, MPS began administering an assessment very similar to the WKCE in the subject areas of reading, English/language arts, and mathematics in grades 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 9. Administering the test for nine grades rather than three was another example of how the district amplified state policy, in this case, testing policy.

Standardized assessments were used primarily for accountability purposes. The tests had different uses at different grade levels, making it difficult to identify a single, definitive theory of action related to the assessments in MPS. Standardized assessment results at grades 3, 4, 8, and 10 were

reported by and used for state-level accountability purposes. Historically speaking, Wisconsin attached minimal consequences to school or district performance on standardized assessment. Perhaps the most important step the state took in the past to induce pressure to perform on the assessments was to release results to the media and public. MPS test scores were frequently discussed in the media, especially in Milwaukee. We have already cited the importance of the performance pressure placed on MPS by intense competition for students in the marketplace. Standardized assessment scores frequently entered into public discourse about the basis of problems and challenges facing the district.

The MPS district used standardized test scores in multiple ways. Such measures were prominent in the district accountability plan for schools. 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. Standardized assessment measures also became increasingly central to district-required school improvement plans (referred to in MPS as Education Plans) in the years immediately preceding our study. The new Education Plan template, rolled-out for the 2001-02 school year, placed greater emphasis on standardized achievement scores than ever before. The district also signaled its intention at the beginning of the 2001-02 school year to rely more heavily on school success, as measured against the new Education Plan target goals, to evaluate school principals.

Performance assessments represented an effort by the district to motivate teachers and students to pursue in-depth conceptual learning around academic content.

In MPS, the term *balanced assessment* referred to the idea of using several different types of assessment instruments to gain a well-rounded, overall impression of student, school, and district performance. This philosophy of utilizing multiple measures to evaluate schools was prominently embedded in the district accountability plan. In the *1999-2000 Accountability Report for Milwaukee Public Schools*, school measures were reported for three “tiers.” Tier 1 included district standardized and performance assessment measures common to all schools, Tier 2 included quantitative measures defined and affected at the school level, and Tier 3 measures consisted of a qualitative description of the school prepared by school staff. The following excerpt from the *1999-2000 Accountability Report for Milwaukee Public Schools* conveyed the basic rationale behind balanced assessment and the basic theory as to how this system was expected to guide teaching and learning.

Building upon the need to monitor student achievement progress over time, the district overhauled its student promotion, graduation, testing, and assessment systems. Following considerable discussion and careful study in 1999-00 about the capacity of current district tests and assessments to measure progress and the kinds of data and support needed to advance higher student achievement, the Board approved a new testing and assessment system.

Beginning in 2000-01, in addition to the state-required WKCE administered to 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> graders, students in grades 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 9 were administered tests in reading, English/language arts and mathematics.

Data gathered from these annual tests provided schools, parents and students a clearer picture of each student’s educational strengths and weaknesses and allow for development of more targeted strategies for improving achievement.

Building upon district performance assessments in writing, math and science, and balancing the standardized testing conducted by the district, will be implementation of comprehensive classroom assessments in reading, writing, mathematics, science and social studies—at every grade level, from Kindergarten to grade 12. The MPS writing assessment will continue to be administered and scored centrally. However, schools can select from a menu of classroom assessments or design their own, with the administration and scoring done at the school level.

***District Literacy Initiative.*** During data collection for this study, MPS announced a new district literacy initiative. The exact date of initiative announcement and rollout was not identified in our interviews or in district documentation. A principal interview indicated the superintendent had introduced the initiative

to principals at a district meeting during the second half of July 2001. Interview data indicated district staff were familiar with the initiative in considerable detail by the end of school year 2001-02, that principals and implementers had a general understanding of the initiative, and that teachers were somewhat familiar with it.

The MPS Literacy Initiative coincided with the launching of similar initiatives in many urban school districts nationally. Most similar initiatives emphasized reading and the teaching of reading across the curriculum. MPS also included numeracy and mathematics in their initiative. Some central office staff expressed the hope that this initiative would help the district reestablish teaching and learning as the central district focus. Some time after the literacy initiative was announced, near the conclusion of the 2001-02 school year, the MPS school board approved a policy to house a literacy coach in every school. Literacy coaches, eventually

In MPS, the term *balanced assessment* referred to the idea of using several different types of assessment instruments to gain a well-rounded, overall impression of student, school, and district performance.

paid for out of federal Title I funds, were to act as instructional leaders and on-site professional developers for literacy instruction in the schools.

### ***Professional Development and Technical Support Services.***

Professional development and technical support activities targeting various subject areas or organizational practices (e.g., Education Plans) were numerous. We relied on interviews with school and central office staff members to identify the initiatives they considered most significant. We include this category in this section on “District Initiatives Designed for Direct Effects on Instruction” primarily as a reminder of its importance in respondents’ overall views regarding relations and relationships among central office and schools. Information about specific activities is included in subsequent sections of this report.

### **District Initiatives That Indirectly Affected Instruction**

We turn now to district initiatives that indirectly affected teaching and learning. Several such initiatives—controlled choice, neighborhood schools, and decentralization (related to downsizing of central office, and devolution of budget authority to schools)—have already been described in some detail, including how district staff members expected these initiatives to exert positive influence on teaching and learning. Several other initiatives of indirect

impact are briefly described here because they surfaced frequently in our interviews with central office and school staff members and are referenced in subsequent sections.

***Buyback-Chargeback.*** Though the buyback and chargeback initiatives were inextricably joined from the perspective of many actors—especially school actors—noteworthy technical distinctions exist between the two. A chargeback service is one where the school *must* surrender its budgeted amount for a particular service to the service provider in central office, but can expect a level of service as outlined by the department. A buyback service is one whereby a school *may decline* to use a service or can decide to use a service provider other than the district’s central office. A decision to buy or not buy back a service does not necessarily relieve the school of an activity, but it allows the school to seek providers other than the central office. Ultimately, the chargeback system represented a way of spreading costs associated with district services (e.g., human resources, student services, maintenance) among all schools.

Schools are allocated funds on a per pupil basis and site allocations (e.g. buildings operations). As part of preparing their budgets, the schools complete a buyback-chargeback form. In 2000-2001, buybacks and chargebacks represented an average of 32 percent of the schools’ alloca-

tions. In 2001-2002, they represented an average of 27 percent. (By 2004-2005, buybacks and chargebacks represented an average of 23.7 percent.)

As central office shifted services from the chargeback to the buyback category, schools had the option of purchasing or forgoing services removed from the chargeback category. This arrangement stimulated central office departments to package, price, and market to schools many services that were previously taken for granted. For example, Educational Services offered schools professional development services in various areas, at several levels and price points. Business services offered various levels of assistance to schools in marketing their programs to students and families to reach enrollment targets. The departments that experienced reduced chargebacks, introduced buyback services in an effort to remain viable to the organization. This was the intended effect of the buyback initiative. The theory was that if central office provided school staff with more control over budgets, schools would use that power to encourage central office staff to be more responsive to school and staff needs. School staff were free to shop elsewhere if they believed the district did not offer a service that sufficiently addressed school and staff needs. The overall view expressed by central office respondents was that that such power would benefit school staff,

though central office staff did not explicitly say how or to what extent school staff would focus on curricular or instructional needs when prioritizing discretionary expenditures.

**Capacity-building for Instructional Leadership.** District staff paraphrased the superintendent as having said, “Give me 160 excellent principals and I’ll give you a great school district.” This sentiment, to which teachers often took severe exception, demonstrated the kind of relationship many central office leaders envisioned between schools and central office. It also signaled the extent to which district staff expected principals to perform multiple functions, 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. However, in our sample of eight schools, the observation and interview data indicate that the majority of principals were performing effectively, considering the multi-faceted demands on them.

The central office Department of Leadership Services (changed to Office of Administrative Services in 2003-04) was at the heart of district efforts to monitor, inform, and support principals in their own efforts to perform these multiple functions for teachers, staff, students, and families. The core staff of the department consisted of six leadership specialists

who worked closely with principals. Leadership specialists—sometimes referred to as “principals of principals”—were involved in all aspects of principal supervision. Each leadership specialist had responsibility for a group of principals for a given grade range (e.g., K-5, K-8, 9-12), permitting specialists to become more deeply informed about issues of special importance to subsets of schools. Often principals turned to these specialists first with questions about school matters. Specialists consequently advised principals on district policy, and acted as intermediaries to pass along or retrieve information from staff in other central office departments on principals’ behalf. Specialists oversaw principals in creating their Education Plans, and took a lead role in principals’ annual evaluations.

Leadership Services housed additional staff besides leadership specialists. For example, one staff person provided enhanced technical assistance and professional development to schools making the change from K-5 to K-8, and another assisted high schools with students who had not been formally admitted to 9<sup>th</sup> grade due to failure to satisfy 8<sup>th</sup> grade proficiency requirements.

Another initiative orchestrated by Leadership Services was MPS’s Leadership Institutes. We attended two institutes that brought principals together for three days of professional development and networking during the summer. The June 2001 Institute focused on leadership in all domains,

In our sample of eight schools, the observation and interview data indicate that the majority of principals were performing effectively, considering the multi-faceted demands on them.

with an emphasis on instructional leadership. Topics covered at the institute included leadership skills, data-driven decision-making, and deep knowledge about teaching and learning. The June 2002 institute focused heavily on the implications of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation for school and district accountability.<sup>7</sup>

**Education Plans.** The district defined the format for Education Plans in a template used by all schools. Every plan began with an outline of the district mission and goals statement (see page 36), followed by 11 sections. The major sections were devoted to: 1) data analysis and needs assessment and 2) goals, including school subject-area achievement targets for literacy (reading, language arts, writing); mathematics; literacy across the curriculum (e.g. science, social studies); school climate; and parent and community involvement.

District instructions were emphatic that plans focus primarily on state and district standardized tests in analyzing past school performance and to identify future needs and goals. For each goal identified in the plan, schools were required to specify: 1) strategies and activities to be undertaken to pursue the goal; 2) professional development needed at the school to support progress; 3) persons responsible for carrying out the activities; and 4) funding sources for activities (e.g., Title I, Title VII, SAGE, P-5, grants and gifts, and discretionary district funds).

The Education Plans represented a key tool for structuring communication, guidance, and accountability between central office and schools as the district increasingly devolved operational and instructional authority to schools. A strong argument could be made for placing the Education Plan in the category of initiatives having direct impact on instruction, based on the fact that the plan specified subject areas to be emphasized and required articulation of goals, achievement targets, strategies, and action items. We placed the Education Plan in the indirect category due to its non-specificity regarding required or desired instructional content and practices.

As a result of the relatively high degree of decentralization in MPS, much variability among schools was evident when examining each area of school operations. Although many factors contributed to variability in school practices, principals played an

important role. The role of principals in determining how other school staff members perceived and participated in school operations was evident in teachers' reports of involvement in Education Plan formulation and implementation.

The principal at School A (schools in our study were given pseudonyms for purposes of confidentiality) was perceived by teachers as being good at obtaining outside funding to support special school programs and projecting a positive school image to the community and district office. However, he/she was viewed as having a top-down administrative style and as limiting extensive teacher involvement in school planning and decision-making to a small group of staff. In the excerpt below, a department chair at School A indicated the Education Plan was not something teachers felt closely connected to:

**Interviewer:** As far as the school's Education Plan, are you involved at all in developing that?

**Teacher:** I haven't been, no.

**Interviewer:** Does that—the plan that's developed each year, does that influence at all what you do in your department?

**Teacher:** Honestly, no. We usually get the plan in December, by the time they've printed it. So it truly doesn't have an effect. It's something that is done because somebody is requiring it to be done, but it's not truly being implemented.

**Interviewer:** So teachers don't really look at it, follow it?

**Teacher:** No, and honestly, I

don't think that the average classroom teacher is looking at 'Am I meeting the 12 goals of the district?' They are trying to get to the curriculum of their course to the best of their ability and what they think the kids are going to need for college.

A sharp contrast to the role of the Education Plan at School A was evident at School D. In this school, the principal was widely regarded by teachers as seeking broad staff participation in school planning and improvement. The Education Plan was considered a living document to a greater degree than the other schools in our Milwaukee sample. The staff at School D used their Education Plan to articulate any specific statement of desirable instructional practices in relation to the academic achievement goals specified in the plan. Below is a teacher's response when asked if the school's Education Plan had any direct connection to classroom instruction:

**Teacher:** Yes. We talked a lot about—what happened is at the beginning of the school year. We got into different groups—math, reading, writing. I was in the math group and we looked over the goals we had for last year, and then we had to revise or improve them for this year.

**Interviewer:** Who asked you to do this?

**Teacher:** This was from the district. Every year you have to make changes for your school's Education Plan.

**Interviewer:** So throughout the year you will go back and look at that plan?

**Teacher:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** What changes would you say that you and your colleagues have made in the last few years in strategies for school improvement?

**Teacher:** One I think is the reading, changing to the SRA method of teaching. Also, our math program has changed to use the new Math Investigations.

A second teacher at School D provided a more detailed description of how the school's Education Plan and expectations and goals for classroom instructional practice were tied together.

**Interviewer:** Are there particular approaches that teachers are being encouraged to use, especially in math and reading?

**Teacher:** We have time blocks that we use. And it's written in our Education Plan that we have to devote a certain amount of time to, let's say, reading and math, for example. And then in the regular classrooms they're using pure phonics and they're supposed to do a certain amount of that every day. And so, I think that it's the time factor, you know, and then of course, there's the method that we use for teaching and reading, as well as math. And you know, we spend a certain amount of time, within the block, if it's math, for example, working on basic facts. Doing the 5-minute drills. We do those a certain number of times

per semester, for example. We pretty much set things that we are required to do.

**Interviewer:** If you went into the various classrooms in the school, would you say the majority of teachers are using these methods?

**Teacher:** Yes. And, you know, for children, for example, in reading, [who] are on grade level, those children might be doing more literature-based reading. Whereas, the students who are below grade level, would be doing direct instruction with decoding...whether it's reading mastery, or corrective reading, or horizons, these are all SRA programs. And so it depends on the grade level of the instructional level of your students. But I would say that we're pretty consistent. You know, we don't have one classroom where they're using one series, and the next classroom is using a different series. Pretty much everybody is using the same things.

Compared to other schools in our Milwaukee Sample, staff at School D had especially high levels of within- and across-grade articulation of curricular content and pedagogical practices. Interviews with teachers at School D demonstrated that the school staff believed they would have had high levels of professional dialogue and communication even if the district did not require an Education Plan. However, in preparing their annual Education Plan, the teachers viewed the exercise as another vehicle for encouraging school-wide articulation of instructional goals and strategies.

Whereas staff at School A tended to ignore the Education Plan, and staff at School D dedicated a high level of effort and attention to it, most school staff took an approach to the plan somewhere in between these two ends of the spectrum. Teachers at all schools in our study were aware of the district requirement to prepare an Education Plan. Some teachers reported being involved in developing their plan, but no other school staff in our sample exhibited the level of staff involvement observed at School D.

Teachers at all schools in our study varied in terms of how important they perceived the Education Plans to be to daily school operations and classroom instructional practice. Some teachers at School B believed the Education Plan was important and adhered to it in a general manner. Teachers at School F also reported that staff members were attentive to their Education Plan and that they considered it as a general guide to instructional goals though not a source of specific statements regarding desired content. Teachers at School G indicated they had taken

Teachers at all schools in our study varied in terms of how important they perceived the Education Plans to be to daily school operations and classroom instructional practice.

a similar view of their Education Plan in the years before their school became a charter school. After that, the school charter document became the central statement of school goals and strategies and the school ceased writing an Education Plan per se. At School H, teachers reported they put significant effort into producing plans because the principal viewed it as a useful exercise. One teacher told us the school always fell short of the academic achievement goals contributed to the plan by the district. However, this teacher also indicated the district did not follow up on the low performance results, so teachers did not attach much importance to the plan.

**Interview Authority.** The relationship between the district and the teachers' union was characterized as highly contentious in the years leading up to our study. One indicator of this conflict was the previously noted contest for school board control, perceived by many respondents to be primarily a struggle between forces sympathetic, versus those opposed to the union. Some former superintendents were also characterized as having been at odds with the union. However, two district/union initiatives cited as having on-going importance were mentioned repeatedly by school level respondents.

Three years before we began our fieldwork for this study, the union and the MPS district negotiated an agreement departing from the traditional practice of total central office

control over interviewing, hiring, and assigning teachers to schools. The agreement allowed school staff to assume a lead role in these areas, as long as a majority of teachers in the building voted to adopt the new arrangement. Almost all schools in the district moved immediately to adopt the new approach.

We encountered little evidence that the transfer of interview and hiring authority to schools was initially expected to exert influence on instruction (with the exception of the expected increase in the ability of every school to shape its staff with reference to local priorities). Still, principals and school staff frequently cited the acquisition of interview and hiring authority as the single most important tool they had gained in recent years to increase their ability to improve their schools.

**Teacher Evaluation and Mentoring Program.** The second cooperative district-union initiative identified by respondents was the *Teacher Evaluation and Mentoring Program* (TEAM). Several former superintendents and other central office respondents complained about the difficulties of taking corrective action with the small proportions of tenured teachers who were performing inadequately. Teachers with seniority, when not renewed at one school, typically had first rights to a position elsewhere. The reasons for non-renewal generally remained moot because the process for terminating tenured teachers was time-consuming, costly, and uncertain to be utilized by administrators.

Consequently, ineffective teachers were shuffled from school to school, some as frequent as annually. One respondent indicated a former superintendent referred to this phenomenon as “the dance of the lemons.”

TEAM, established in 1995, gave the district, principals, and teachers another option. Upon referral by one's principal, peers, or through self-referral, a teacher agreeing to the TEAM process would gain access to structured professional support. The support included mentoring by master teachers. According to a publication of the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association (MTEA, September 26, 2001), 186 teachers were referred during the first five years. Of those deemed to qualify for TEAM participation (i.e., teachers with three years of experience who had been properly observed and evaluated), at least 47 resigned, 10 refused assistance, and 36 accepted; 31 of the 36 who received two semesters of TEAM mentoring improved and continued teaching in MPS. None of the teachers we interviewed had received assistance from TEAM. Principals reported the program worked well to either improve the performance of ineffective teachers or to remove them from the system.

The TEAM initiative was categorized here as an indirect influence on instruction because we have no evidence to show the extent to which teaching and learning may have changed in the classrooms of teachers who participated in the program.

## Communicating and Implementing District Instructional Initiatives

In this section, we consider the extent and nature of interaction between central office and school staff members in formulating policy tools that shape instruction, as well as the on-going interaction on instructional matters. We identified five areas of action and communication that were prominent in district administrators' efforts to communicate and interact with school staff members around policies related to instructional reform. The five areas are:

- 1) Ad hoc committees—especially for the purpose of producing foundational instructional guidance documents (e.g., standards, proficiencies, education plans)
- 2) Standing committees with regular meetings
- 3) Standing technical assistance structures (including leadership specialists)
- 4) Professional development
- 5) Devolution of resources and decision-making authority to schools (including decentralization and other initiatives having primarily indirect effects on instruction)

These areas of action and communication varied in the manner and degree to which they allowed school staff members to engage in co-construction of district initiatives shaping instructional reform. We consider each in order below.

### 1 Ad Hoc Committees

School board actions periodically called for significant change or further specification of district-wide instructional guidance. This was typically followed by the formation of a committee to produce one or more documents to articulate the relevant aspects of the district instructional vision. Several such documents were described earlier (e.g., district standards, district proficiencies, and the district's Education Plan). In most cases, school staff members were included on the committees that designed and produced such basic instructional guidance documents. For example, the 1998 district standards document indicates that seven central office staff, two principals, and 37 teachers served on the committee that designed and drafted the standards for English/Language Arts/Reading/Writing. During our fieldwork, we encountered one resource teacher who was deeply involved in a district committee working to flesh out the literacy initiative recently adopted the board. Likewise, the district committee that had developed the district proficiencies included teachers and principals as well as central office staff. Teachers also reported intense interaction with central office staff in textbook adoption committees.

Typically, this kind of committee work would bring district and school staff into relatively intense interaction over one or two semesters, but without any follow-up. It is difficult to assess the overall level of interaction between school and central office staff as a result of teacher participa-

tion in district committees. Half or more of our teacher interviewees were considered by principals or other teachers to be teacher leaders. Teacher leaders were more involved in district committee work than other teachers. It was difficult to generalize about teacher involvement in district committees because activity at the level of individual teachers fluctuated over time. Some teachers would participate intensively in committees to accomplish a specific task—select a textbook, write standards, design performance assessments—for a limited period of time, followed by a period of up to several years with little or no committee work, followed by another intensive period of committee work.

As one example, we encountered numerous references to, and descriptions of, a group called the Middle School Principals' Collaborative, including the role of the Collaborative in the formulation of district proficiencies. Respondents indicated the Collaborative served as a key district policy initiative,

**This kind of committee work would bring district and school staff into relatively intense interaction over one or two semesters, but without any follow-up.**

which was consistent with information from the previously cited paper on the proficiencies (Clune, Mason, Pohs, Thiel, & White, April 2, 2002). The Collaborative was founded in 1997—at about the same time that the board initiated development of the proficiencies system.

The idea behind the initiative was to provide leadership around issues of special import for the district's 17,000 middle school students. Given the potential impact upon middle school instruction and accountability, a top priority of the Collaborative was to be highly involved in the proficiencies. As one principal explained, middle school principals decided that if the proficiencies were going to be implemented, then they might as well take a proactive approach and try to make the proficiencies as productive as possible for schools and students. The following quote from this principal conveys this perspective:

...the proficiency [initiative] was a different thing in that it no longer was a central office-driven thing. What was interesting about that was that the Middle School [Principals'] Collaborative was formed around that same time. They [the principals] had just decided to come together as a collaborative and then this proficiency thing came down on them, and they [the principals] had to decide to resist it as a new accountability measure that was going to kill them, or to embrace it. They chose to embrace it

**“When the middle school principals decided they were going to make sure their kids made proficiency, they involved their staff, the learning coordinators, and they became involved in redefining the assessments and what the proficiencies looked like. They took control of it.”**

because they felt that there wasn't enough structure to the curriculum in middle schools. They [central office administrators] said it would give us structure and goals. When the middle school principals decided they were going to make sure their kids made proficiency, they involved their staff, the learning coordinators, and they became involved in redefining the assessments and what the proficiencies looked like. They took control of it. Then they mobilized their own staff.... That was where reform ended up being driven by the schools. When some people came to the board and tried to remove the requirement, the middle school principals actually stood up and said they wanted it. Politically, it could have easily gone down when it looked like some kids were going to fail.

With funding from the Danforth Foundation, the Middle School Principals' Collaborative put extensive time and energy into meeting to plan proficiency implementation, creating tools to monitor and guide the process, and participating in professional development to enhance their own instructional leadership capabilities. Clune, Mason, Pohs, Thiel, & White (April 2, 2002) indicate that the Collaborative successfully petitioned central office for increased funding for tutoring programs to be held after-school and Saturdays. They developed their own database to help teachers track individual student progress toward proficiencies. The Collaborative worked with the district to move performance assessment scoring from central office to the schools. When the district began showing concern about a potentially large number of students not passing proficiency by the end of the school year, the Collaborative worked with the district to create an intensive, extensive unit students could complete during summer school to meet proficiency. In these and many other ways, middle school principals and their staffs worked with central office to make implementation of the proficiencies proceed in a manner that gave school staff a method to coordinate instructional practices and establish a more interactive approach to working with central office.

Despite the proactive approach taken by the Collaborative, substantial problems arose around the proficiencies, and central office eventually stepped in to impose a strategy for managing these problems. In May 2000, the district was faced with approximately 1,200 students who were at risk of being retained in 8<sup>th</sup> grade due to not meeting proficiency requirements. This represented a major logistical problem, since the middle schools did not have the space or the staff to accommodate these students. Below is a quote from a high school principal describing ramifications of central office decisions around non-proficient students for the principal's own school.

Let me give you a typical example of how [central office] operates. Eighth graders that didn't meet proficiencies are called 8Ts.

They're supposed to remain in the middle schools. Last minute, central office calls us and says we're inheriting the 8Ts. That's 170 for us. A couple of classrooms for us.... District-wide they had over 1,200 8<sup>th</sup> grade transition.... We don't know what to do with them.... They say, 'Don't worry, we're going to perfect this' So we call the kids in and it turns out that the problem is attendance. Then [central office] said that anyone who doesn't make it would be housed at the alternative school. Guess what they told us May 30 at our central office meeting? They don't have enough seats anywhere. We're going to have them as 9Ts. Over four years, and my question to them

**For a significant period of time, the proficiencies represented the best example of concrete coordination of central office/school staff members on an initiative with direct instructional impacts.**

was who do the dropout rates go to? Do they go back to the middle school or do I inherit the dropout rate? That's significant. That's their mentality. Nobody has the vision to think things out ahead of time.

As will be discussed below, middle school principals and staff in our sample (including middle grade teachers in K-8 schools) treated the proficiencies as a high instructional priority throughout the year of our data collection. However, by the end of the school year, numerous teachers reported that the board and central office were considering lowering the stakes for proficiencies or possibly doing away with them altogether. Although the long-term consequences of high levels of central office/school collaboration around the proficiencies were uncertain, for a significant period of time, the proficiencies represented the best example of concrete coordination of central office/school staff members on an initiative with direct instructional impacts.

## **2** Standing Committees with Regular Meetings

Milwaukee Public Schools relied heavily on meetings of standing committees to work out potential and actual district policies and to convey district policies and information related to instruction. Central office staff believed school staff attending these meetings would relay important information back to principals and teachers. While many school staff attended these meetings, in some cases, school staff exercised discretion by discontinuing participation on committees they deemed to be of insufficient value to justify the time and effort expected.

The type of school staff identified for participation in central office committees and meetings varied. For example, each central office department had its own advisory committee comprised of school principals, in addition to senior department staff. The committees met regularly to give principals a chance to help central office departments explore potential and actual district policies involving the department and ultimately affecting schools.

We observed one of the Finance Department meetings. The group vigorously discussed aspects of the district buyback initiative. District and school officials attending the meeting did not attempt to make final policy decisions on any given issue at that meeting. Rather, the focus was

on exploration of options and potential consequences. Communication among central office and school staff members appeared constructive and substantive and the group appeared to have a common understanding that it was important for them to have sustained conversations around core issues. School staff spoke at least as much as, if not more than, central office staff. Central office staff did not attempt to control the flow of information or dictate the agenda. Observing this meeting gave us the impression of balanced interaction and collaboration among central office and school staff. However, we do not know if this meeting was representative or the extent to which such committees ultimately affected district policy and practice.

Other central office committees included additional teachers (regular classroom and instructional support staff). These committees functioned to disseminate district policies already formulated, as well as seek some school feedback and input on implementation considerations. For example, high school subject area department chairs met regularly as a group. According to several respondents, these meetings varied widely in terms of how useful or relevant they were to the members. Mid- to low-level central office staff were typically given primary responsibility for providing leadership to these committees. One high school department chair we interviewed reported that

the person responsible for the district meetings for department chairs in his/her subject area was not effective. Consequently, the department chair reported receiving permission from his/her school principal to skip regular district subject area meetings.

In addition to principals and department chairs, teachers working in the role of instructional implementers and learning coordinators met regularly with central office staff. Our data indicates that implementers and coordinators were second only to principals in terms of the amount of interaction with central office staff. Below is a quote from a learning coordinator providing an overview of his/her monthly meetings with his/her colleagues:

**Learning Coordinator:** Once a month, I have a learning coordinators' meeting. So, it's all the learning coordinators from the middle school and some of the implementers from the K-

In addition to principals and department chairs, teachers working in the role of instructional implementers and learning coordinators met regularly with central office staff.

8—whoever has 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> graders in their school. We meet monthly. [The mid-level central office manager] who's also in charge of [subject area], is our leader.... [Teachers] know that I go to the monthly meetings, and so through department minutes, they write any questions that they have for me, and if I don't know it, I find out at this meeting. And [central office manager] will bring in all the different department leaders at Central Office, if we have questions. You know, we wanted to know about the music.... Like, [name], from the music department, wanted to get us some information about spring concerts that are coming up. At our last meeting, [she] was there, because [she] knows that [she] can disperse all this information. [She] can come to one meeting, disperse it to all the learning coordinators, and the learning coordinators will make sure they get it back to the teachers as they need to. Which finally, this year... they're they're getting smarter in how they can disperse this information. You know, they're working smarter, not necessarily harder.

**Interviewer:** So, you think it's improving.

**Learning Coordinator:** It is improving. That's definitely improved.

The preceding quote demonstrates the important role the implementers and coordinators played in the district's broader strategy for maintaining an organizational infrastructure to ensure a level of consistency in disseminating district instructional policy and guiding school level implementation. This is important when considered in the context of earlier evidence regarding the degree to which budget cuts and decentralization initiatives over the years reduced the capacity of central office staff, especially in Educational Services, to work directly with, and in, every school. Our data on implementers and coordinators indicates that these school staff had emerged as important intermediaries to convey information from central office to schools, and back. In doing this, they compensated for reduced opportunities for communication related to changes such as reductions in numbers of central office subject area specialists.

**The leadership specialists in Leadership Services were considered by many to be an on-going source of technical assistance dedicated to helping principals fulfill their multi-faceted roles.**

### **3 Standing Technical Assistance Structures**

Various central office departments offered on-going technical assistance that school staff were eligible to seek through various means. A limited amount of technical assistance activities, which had traditionally been offered to all schools, were moved into the buyback category. These activities served as a nexus of central office/school interaction in those schools where principals made a conscious decision to purchase the services.

For example, a significant number of schools in our sample purchased marketing assistance from the Business Services Department of central office. Such assistance was offered at several levels, with the most expensive package costing less than \$3,000. One principal said he/she had bought this deluxe package, stating that he/she thought it was a "no-brainer". From this principal's perspective, the expenditure would pay for itself in the form of additional per-pupil funding if the investment brought just one more student into the school. Reportedly, principals who had substantial waiting lists for their schools often passed up the service. One of the principals in our sample expressed the belief that his/her school had an extensive and effective marketing strategy that included all Business Services offered and more.

The leadership specialists in Leadership Services were considered by many to be an on-going source of technical assistance dedicated to helping principals fulfill their multi-faceted roles. The technical assistance function was recognized as an important part of the leadership specialist's role by specialists themselves and principals. Principals reported collegial, productive interactions with specialists, indicating that they were comfortable turning to specialists with questions, concerns, and problems.

Principals praised the interactions they had with their leadership specialists. Specialists worked with groups of principals in schools serving the same grade levels. One specialist focused on schools that were switching from K-5 regional schools to K-8 neighborhood schools. Working with clusters of schools undergoing similar processes led to specialists acquiring information of special importance to the schools they served. Due to this exposure, specialists were equipped with substantial information whenever a principal called with questions. Specialists routinely assumed responsibility for obtaining the information they did not have from other central office staff members.

## 4 Professional Development

Interaction between school staff and central office around professional development was complex, partly because of fluidity in district policy and the district's vision for Educational Services. This vision included reducing the size of Educational Services to the point where it was no longer possible to deliver intensive professional development or technical assistance on a school-by-school basis. As Educational Services became smaller, the division focused increasingly on district-level curricular guidance policy (e.g., standards and assessments), and centralized meetings with a top-down information flow as primary strategies for affecting instruction. However, simultaneously, individual mid- to low-level staff in Educational Services with strong subject area backgrounds had a reputation for effective service to schools. Individual staff members in Educational Services were widely respected and sought out by schools for the support and guidance they offered schools in instructional planning and improvement. However, as discussed earlier, other staff members in Educational Services were viewed by school staff as ineffective.

The limited capacity of Educational Services on instructional practice at the school or classroom level was demonstrated, according to responses from school staff, by what happened when central office tried to move a much larger portion of Educational Services' activities into the buyback

**Few school staff attributed extensive impact to professional development delivered by Educational Services on classroom instructional practice.**

category. Principals responded by buying very little of what was offered by Educational Services, to the point of threatening the basic funding base needed to maintain the department in its downsized form. The board, however, was not prepared to see the department dwindle so they intervened by pulling the funding back from schools in order to sustain Educational Services.

Principals cited this as an example of confusion created by board changes in policy. Few school staff attributed extensive impact to professional development delivered by Educational Services on classroom instructional practice. Some school staff identified district in-services that had been useful, but most teachers received relatively little professional development directly from Educational Services. The exceptions were the teachers who were most highly engaged professionally. These teachers were more likely to interact with, and report feeling supported by, central office.

## 5 Devolution of Resources and Decision-making Authority

The decision by the MPS school board to intervene to recoup resources for Educational Services did not eliminate discretionary funds for schools. Some schools also pursued entrepreneurial activities to secure independent funding sources. Such schools were able to utilize these resources to procure intensive, sustained professional development from providers outside central office and the district. We tried to clarify the extent to which professional development at the school or sample level was delivered by the district or paid for with district funds. We also tried to get detailed descriptions of district professional development. However, retrospective descriptions of professional development were difficult to obtain. Questions remained regarding the degree to which school staff relied on the district directly versus other providers for professional development.

Toward the end of our fieldwork, we observed increasingly frequent references by central office staff members to the concept of "embedded professional development." District leaders were moving toward a vision of professional development in which teacher professional development would be interwoven into teachers' on-going curricular planning, delivery, self-evaluation, and continuous improvement.

## School Perspective on District's Instructional Priorities

School staff members perceived the main focus of central office to be organizational reforms that exerted only indirect effects on instructional practice.

As noted earlier, principals appreciated having more discretionary funding, but believed the amount of time they were investing in budget matters was problematic. Most principals indicated they had little experience with school budget decisions before decentralization and invested much time learning about this new aspect of their role.

Principals expressed the belief that educational leadership specialists were very effective in carrying out their responsibilities. Teachers recognized the importance of leadership specialists to principals, but did not have a detailed understanding of interactions among specialists and principals.

Teachers and principals alike were supportive of the devolution of interview authority to schools. Many believed it gave them more control to build a strong faculty—one made up of staff with more compatible phi-

losophies, values, and instructional goals. This may have been especially valued by school staff members in Milwaukee, due to the considerable autonomy the district had given schools to develop a clear and marketable school vision, identity, and instructional program. School staff members expressed the belief that the new hiring system optimized their ability to find new teachers who fit well with existing staff.

To the extent that teachers perceived a district focus on instruction, they reported student achievement as a key district concern. Emphasis on state standardized tests had reportedly always been present, as evidenced by the district expanding the same assessment to more grade levels than required. Simultaneously, the district developed and invested heavily in other forms of assessment and student performance measures, such as performance assessments and proficiencies. In the excerpt below, a teacher from School A discussed the belief expressed by many teachers that the district testing program was extensive, to the point of infringing on time available for instruction.

**Interviewer:** We talked a bit about testing. Would you say the district is moving in any specific direction as far as encouraging or pressing for certain kinds of testing?

**Teacher:** Oh yeah. They have gone overboard with testing. Any more testing and you won't be teaching. We have the WKCE. We have the Terra Nova. We have

the high school graduation test. We've got supposedly the built-in tests in the four major curriculum areas.... Next year we're losing four mornings to the high school graduation test...losing two more mornings to both the 10<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade testing...two mornings for math and English proficiency testing in the spring. A morning for seniors for math testing in the fall, and a morning for seniors for testing English in the fall. You know, that's a lot of time to be taking out.

Teachers varied in their views on being judged by standardized test scores, but most recognized the emphasis on scores as a reality not likely to go away. In the excerpt below, a teacher from School H explained that much attention was given to test scores by a variety of people. The teacher went on to note ways in which he/she perceived the reporting of test scores to exclude much information about influences on student achievement beyond the control of schools, and to focus

Teachers and principals alike were supportive of the devolution of interview authority to schools. Many believed it gave them more control to build a strong faculty.

on absolute scores as opposed to improvement. The majority of teacher respondents indicated they wanted to be judged on improvement, not on absolute scores.

**Interviewer:** Who pays attention to the reading scores? Who cares about them?

**Teacher:** Who cares about them? The State cares about them. Central office cares about them. Oh, yeah! I mean, they must.... When I say care, they are very quick to publicize that...this is the scores and show that you're here and somebody else is there. So, I think everybody is looking at it. I think the community looks at it. And maybe even say—well, use it as a measure of whether you're being successful with the kids, or not.

**Interviewer:** How do you develop a sense of why or in what way test scores matter, as a teacher? Is it real direct information, or is it just kind of just floating around in your environment...?

**Teacher:** I think it's pretty direct. When it's in the newspaper, it's usually with a big headline that smacks us again-in-the-face type of thing.

**Interviewer:** Usually it's critical?

**Teacher:** Yes. Very much so.

**Interviewer:** Like?

**Teacher:** Like, for example, we have a high population of students who maybe have only been in

this country for some months, in some cases. With the Star test, it's in English.... They know very little English, but they still take that test. The Gates test is also in English.

It's kind of like a vocabulary-type thing. They won't do well on it, even if they can read very well in their own language. They do provide another test that's in Spanish, I think.... When they publish that score, they don't show where the child was when they came to you, in the first place.

Teachers varied in their views as to whether the state test was based on valid and appropriate measures. Some thought the test was challenging and focused on appropriate content. Below, a teacher from School D expressed the legitimacy of test scores and formulated much of his/her role as a teacher accordingly.

**Interviewer:** What are the core instructional issues or goals that your school has been focusing on?

**Teacher:** We want to raise the test scores, especially for Milwaukee public schools.

**Interviewer:** Is there any area where the test scores are getting most attention in your school?

**Teacher:** In our school, all of our scores are some of the highest if not the very highest in the district, but I would think that the two things that we are really focusing on right now are reading and writing scores, followed by math and science.

**Interviewer:** Is that because reading and writing scores were absolutely lower or because reading and writing is so important in the primary grades . . . ?

**Teacher:** I think that my principal expressed the fact that if you can read, you can probably do most anything else because you can get the directions and the instructions and teach yourself or learn on your own. Writing because people still have to know how to communicate and get their ideas across. There's a lot more verbal type stuff going on, but you also have to be able to put things down on paper and express yourself.

**Interviewer:** Does your school have any core goals that are not formulated in terms of test scores or test performance?

**Teacher:** Yes, we have a lot of them that we have different committees. I think we talked about this last time. And each committee has reviewed the standards within our own school. And although our scores are some of the...they are the highest in the district and have been for the last five years. We still want to raise them two, three and four percent over the next three years. We're not going to be satisfied with the status quo. Go higher yet 'cause we see that the kids can do this or that level so we are putting them a little bit higher.

Other teacher respondents, including the School D teacher quoted below, expressed the belief that standardized tests were often biased against urban children, who are the majority of MPS students.

**Teacher:**...I think that having all of this testing, I think the jury is still out on that, whether all of this testing is a good thing. I think that it's difficult for kids to sit down and take a test that is going to go on over a course of a couple of days, and they're going to have to sit for an hour at a time working on this test.

**Interviewer:** What evidence will you have to show that it is working or isn't working?

**Teacher:** I think that when we get our results back from the test and we find that we've got a lot of kids who are proficient or above. Or at least basic. You know, that we don't have a lot of kids that are below the basic level, the minimal. We don't want a lot of kids to be on the minimal level. I think that it helps us to know that we are headed in the right direction. But I'm not so sure, some of these tests, you know...there's always going to be bias. There's always going to be things that... for instance, you talk about the mountains and some of our kids have never seen the mountains. They've never seen the ocean. They've barely even seen the lake.

Teachers were much more supportive of, and committed to, performance assessments the district had developed and implemented. However, teachers perceived the district to be pulling back from investing in performance assessments and giving them sufficient weight in the district accountability system. Teachers and implementers felt proficiencies initially held potential to guide instruction and motivate student performance, but school staff expressed the belief that the school board's reversal on 8Ts undermined the value of the proficiencies as an accountability tool.

Teachers' and principals' perceptions of other central office instructional guidance policies ranged from indifferent to moderately positive. School staff believed that the standards were educationally sound and well-aligned to state and national standards. However, the standards specified only content and did not address pedagogy. Furthermore, the central office did little monitoring of teacher adherence to standards. The district was very non-prescriptive regarding curricular materials and programming and liberal in the range of textbooks and other materials supplied to schools. In rare cases where district choice of curricular materials did not include what school staff wanted, school staff had the power to spend discretionary funds to buy what they wanted anyway. This contributed to considerable diversity of instructional approaches among schools.

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.

Central office/school relations around professional development were characterized as undergoing change. Individually and collectively, teachers viewed themselves as becoming increasingly self-sufficient. Where school staff members found value in extensive interaction with central office staff, interaction levels were significant. Where relationships were not seen as productive, school staff members invested as little as possible in maintaining relationships. On balance, school staff were reported as more proactive in seeking out appropriate professional development from non-district providers. 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. Some school staff became very efficient at this. The trend increased the complexity and time demands of many teachers as professionals, but most teachers viewed this as a necessary and important aspect of their work. As a result of the trend toward self-sufficiency in procuring professional

development, teachers and principals accepted increasingly greater personal responsibility for their own professional learning.

Most principals and teachers perceived the district Education Plan template and planning process as beneficial. Some principals noted they had been complimented by central office staff, such as leadership specialists, on the quality of their plans. A principal at one school reported having pointed out to central office that coherent and well-presented plans were effective, but even better would be plans backed by a level of resources and organizational capacity commensurate with the level of effort indicated by good plans. This principal expressed concern about being able to implement aspects of the Education Plan submitted by his/her school.

Teachers were generally supportive of the Education Plans. Some schools involved the bulk of teachers in creating their plans, whereas others delegated the work to small groups. The extent to which teachers were involved in the process affected teachers' perceptions of the quality and legitimacy of the plan. One aspect of the Education Plan that school staff members often disagreed on was district control of target scores for student achievement tests. This district policy made many teachers feel as though they were being judged against absolute achievement criteria rather than growth in performance over time.

Based on teachers' responses, the central office had modest impact on instruction due to low specificity in curriculum guidance, and limited direct interaction with schools around instruction. Principals and implementers reportedly had the most contact with district staff members. Principals and implementers also had a more detailed understanding than teachers of how district decisions and strategies affecting instructional content and delivery were filtered down into classrooms. Teachers relied heavily on implementers and principals for guidance about instructional matters and did not necessarily know when local guidance provided by principals and implementers represented district priorities, principal or implementer priorities, or a complex combination of both. This uncertainty was a function of limited direct contact between teachers and central office administrators and their consequent heavy reliance on principals and implementers as intermediaries.

**Respondents described school leadership as being shared by principals, coordinators, resource teachers, and classroom teachers.**

## School Instructional Leadership Roles

**R**espondents described school leadership as being shared by principals, coordinators, resource teachers, and classroom teachers. These individuals varied in their areas of involvement. The emphasis of a given individual also varied throughout the year as demands from central office to focus on one or another task changed (e.g., Education Plans, budgets, student enrollment/recruitment, teacher hiring, proficiency accounting, and standardized testing). Staff members in each category had responsibilities in all areas, but varied in terms of degree of emphasis on a given area. For example, some principals were effective at budgeting, while other principals allocated as much budget work as possible to other administrators. However, all principals had to give significant attention to the full range of operational and instructional issues.

With teachers too, many reported engagement in a broad range of school functions and roles. For example, most schools had numerous standing committees, in addition to grade-level teams, and required teachers to be on at least one committee. Based on interview data, shared leadership was broader and deeper in elementary and K-8 schools than in high schools. Smaller schools may have required a greater proportion of staff to perform the roles. The sheer size of many high

schools permitted greater specialization than could be achieved in most elementary schools. Even if some schools were large enough to permit a smaller proportion of teachers to assume substantial leadership roles, teachers in most schools supplied considerable leadership in most areas.

Leadership roles, as reflected in the interviews, addressed four areas or imperatives: operational, instructional, professional, and moral. Leaders at all levels appeared to take on leadership in all four areas. However, insofar as direct interaction with central office was concerned, principals and, to some degree, implementers, generally represented the school. For this reason, the involvement of teachers in contributing leadership in each domain was not always direct and visible in the interactions themselves. Nonetheless, based on respondents' accounts, each category of respondent provided leadership in each area, even if the exact source of leadership became unclear when interactions were conducted through intermediaries.

Teachers viewed the district as providing the most specific guidance in the operational area, with instructional and professional guidance—which were highly intertwined—being second. Principals and teachers alike often posited or strongly implied an imperative for moral leadership. This had various dimensions, but equality of educational opportunity for traditionally underserved student populations was an especially prominent concern. The following series of state-

ments were taken from sections of an interview with a school principal. The interview passages show how moral leadership was integral to this principal's understanding of his/her role.

**Principal:**...Assuming the principalship of this school was a calling, a passionate call from my heart. This school is very much like the schools I attended.... My passion is with teaching, learning, and giving children some sense of G.O.D.—Good Orderly Direction—and a will to learn, to be of substance to your community.... Why did I come to School C? Why should I not? This is the school of 'Don't expect much,' but the kids and the staff and the community expect much. This is the school of 'Oh, who believes in them?' I happen to love that people call us the underdog.... Why not come here? School C has everything every other school has. It has the greatest students in the world. It has people who are asked to work with these children in these communities, and therefore I believe they have the capacity to deliver sound, engaging, rigorous instruction if given the support and the sense of belief they need. My job, quite frankly, is to support teachers.

The principal went on to express an idea also related by many teachers—the idea that poor urban students were capable of succeeding academically if teachers acquired new pedagogical knowledge to approach instruction in non-traditional ways.

**Principal:** I don't know if teachers know how to teach today's student. It requires a whole lot of different approaches. Do we understand whom we're teaching and from where they're coming? Just because they live in a poor neighborhood doesn't mean that their brain capacity is less. I want to do brain-based learning. I want to learn about the physiology of learning. I want to talk more about how student grouping and working with community groups and universities and then just searching. In the end, we know the district's issue to have x number of credits in certain subjects. But what is learning? I want them to learn classical information.

Attention to the moral dimensions of leadership was consistently evident among principals and teachers. Such imperatives were also observed by managers in central office, though not by as great a proportion of central office as school staff. Relative to this observation, it is important to remember that the teachers we sampled, including implementers/coordinators, were selected because they were recognized as instructional leaders. This may have affected our understanding of the prevalence and importance of a given type of leadership at the school level. However, as far as central office was concerned, teachers did not perceive clear, steady signals regarding the organization's moral obligation and commitment to students and the community.

## Summary

**M**ilwaukee Public Schools had numerous initiatives designed to affect instruction directly or indirectly. In many cases, district efforts exceeded or amplified the relatively sparse and non-specific instructional guidance conveyed by the state. District staff provided at least a basic theory of change as to how initiatives were intended to affect schools and instruction. Theories of change sometimes included an understanding of, or expectations about, possible interaction among multiple initiatives.

On balance, central office administrators were more focused on non-instructional than instructional matters. Where the focus was on instruction, policies and signals were non-specific regarding intended effects on classroom teaching and learning. Many mid-level central office managers perceived that the district was striving to recover an emphasis on teaching and learning. However, these managers acknowledged severe limits on district capac-

Many mid-level central office managers perceived that the district was striving to recover an emphasis on teaching and learning.

ity to interact intensively with schools around the intricacies of instructional delivery.

The general perception 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.

We identified five areas that central office emphasized in interactions with school staff members to communicate district policy and give school staff opportunities for input. The guidance provided to principals by leadership specialists, and the role of middle school principals in implementing the proficiencies were noted as two areas where collaboration among central office and school staff members was reportedly strong. The Department of Educational Services was viewed as relying heavily on centralized committee work and one-way information flows. The impact of school board decisions and decentralization was consistently evident in interaction among school and central office staff members.

School staff generally perceived the district as focused on organizational reform as compared with instructional reform. Principals were appreciative of the support provided by leadership specialists. Most school staff members were supportive of assuming greater responsibility for teacher hiring. In the instructional realm, student achievement was perceived as a strong emphasis. Teachers accepted the emphasis, but

The general perception 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.

believed it would be more educationally productive to focus on student growth over time than upon absolute achievement levels. The proficiencies were viewed as successful in many ways, but as having lost some of their potential power as accountability mechanisms. Education Plans were viewed as beneficial. Teachers reported modest effects by district instructional guidance tools such as standards and curricular materials due to low specificity of such policies about desired actual classroom practices. Professional development support was viewed as quite limited due to teachers' tendencies to compare current to historical district capacity for professional development. The heavy and increasing reliance of teachers on principals and implementers to act as intermediaries in interactions with central office served to change teachers' perceptions of the scope and depth of central office support for schools.

Standardized test scores played an increasingly important role in an environment of school choice and federal *No Child Left Behind* requirements.

All school staff members provided significant leadership in each of four key areas: operational, instructional, professional, and moral leadership roles, though the relative emphasis on a given area of leadership varied

according to the staff member's role as teacher, implementer, or principal. We observed a connection between school size and the proportion of teachers involved in leadership roles, with teachers in smaller schools having more involvement. Of the four areas of leadership, school staff more consistently expressed concern regarding equality of educational opportunity than central office staff members. Exceptions existed in both directions among school and district at the school and district levels. A general pattern noted among school staff members was the perception that schools needed to become increasingly self-sufficient and that

this would require deepening school capacity for leadership and action in all aspects of school operations and instruction.

State programs provided both additional resources as well as loss of resources through the state-implemented Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. This and other choice options put pressure on district leaders and elevated the importance of the district's Neighborhood School Plan. Standardized test scores played an increasingly important role in an environment of school choice and federal *No Child Left Behind* requirements.



## Concluding Thoughts

**M**ajor district initiatives that influenced instruction both directly and indirectly:

- District initiatives exceeded or amplified the non-specific instructional guidance conveyed by the state.
- Central office staff members were more focused on non-instructional than instructional matters.
- Where the focus was on instruction, policies and signals were non-specific regarding intended effects on classroom teaching and learning.
- School staff, especially principals, assumed a greater leadership role in all aspects of school operations, including instruction.
- School capacity for instructional improvement increased.

How district administrators communicated instructional reform to schools:

- Five areas of action and communication were prominent in central office efforts to communicate with school staff regarding instructional reform:
  - (1) ad hoc committees
  - (2) standing committees with regular meetings
  - (3) standing technical assistance structures (including leadership specialists)
  - (4) professional development
  - (5) devolution of resources and decision-making authority to schools

- Guidance provided to principals by leadership specialists and the role of middle school principals in implementing the proficiencies were two areas where collaboration among central office and school staff was reportedly strong.
- Educational Services were viewed as relying heavily on centralized committee work and one-way information flows.
- The impact of school board decisions and decentralization was consistently evident in interaction among school and central office administrators.

School staff members' perceptions of district instructional priorities and strategies for reform:

- The district focused on organizational reform rather than instructional reform.
- Principals were appreciative of the support provided by leadership specialists.
- School staff were supportive of assuming greater responsibility for teacher hiring.
- Teachers believed it was more educationally productive to focus on student growth than on absolute achievement levels.
- The proficiencies were viewed as successful but as having lost some of their potential as accountability mechanisms.

- The Education Plans were viewed as beneficial.
- Professional development was viewed as quite limited.
- The heavy reliance of teachers on principals and implementers to act as intermediaries in interactions with central office served to change teachers' perceptions of the scope and depth of central office support for schools.

School Leadership roles adopted to implement district policies:

- School staff members provided significant leadership in four areas: operational, instructional, imperative, and moral, with the relative emphasis on a given area varying according to the staff member's role as teacher, implementer, or principal.
- School size and the proportion of teachers involved in leadership roles were related.
- School staff members expressed more concern regarding equality of educational opportunity than central office staff.
- School staff members perceived that schools needed to become increasingly self-sufficient and that this would require deepening school capacity for leadership and action in all aspects of school operations and instruction.

## Case Study

# The Seattle Public Schools

By Dr. Judy Swanson

## Introduction

The goal of this study was to understand the ways in which central office and school staff interacted around district and school-level policies to improve student performance. Seattle Public Schools (SPS) provided an interesting case example in which to investigate the complex relationship between central policies for standards-based reform and improving instruction at the school and classroom levels.

Standards and accountability seem to imply centralized control, an uncomfortable notion in a decentralized district like Seattle where site-based control was expected. Some of that discomfort was tempered because the district, during the time of this study (school years 2001 and 2002),

was in the enviable position of having over \$35 million in external funds to support reform efforts. To some extent, these external funders even shaped the direction of the district's reform by exposing district leaders to reform ideas and a vision of effective schools. Regardless of the direction, they certainly provided the impetus for the pace and scope of the reform by supplying resources to fund it. While the design and approach of the reform efforts were controlled by the district, expertise provided by external agents helped individual schools make sense of what were often perceived by school staff to be vague and sometimes conflicting policy mandates for the reform agenda.

According to central office staff, standards defined what students should know and be able to do, thereby

providing the overarching guide for schools to raise student achievement. While the standards identified the targets, the district's Transformational Academic Achievement Planning process was designed as the vehicle for helping schools develop their own strategy for reaching the goals of: 1) helping all students meet standards, and 2) eliminating the achievement gap between white students and students of color.

Toward that end, some of the district's multifaceted efforts involved initiatives that *directly* targeted improving instruction, while others were designed to build organizational capacity. According to central office leaders, initiatives that focused on school structures and capacity were intended to support instructional improvements but their focus and effects appeared to be more *indirect*. At the same time, schools were shaping their own plans for improving teaching and learning. The extent to which the district initiatives supported or reinforced school-level reforms affected the quality of the relationship between the central office and schools. The goal was to understand how that relationship shaped district and school interactions in the efforts to improve student learning.



## Recent History of the District's Role in Instructional Reform

To understand the reform agenda during our field research, a brief introduction to the context is needed. The history of reform efforts in the district is an important aspect of the context that shapes educators' attitudes toward new district initiatives. At the same time, the district must operate under increasing accountability pressures from local, state, and federal requirements. (For a complete time line, see Seattle Appendix C in this case study.)

### State and District Context

In 1993, the passage of the Education Reform Act in the state of Washington marked the beginning of a standards-based system with the development of the Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs). Since then, Washington's slow and deliberate process in designing a rigorous assessment system attempted to stimulate good teaching practices.

In 1997, a state performance assessment based on the EALRs at grades 4, 7, and 10 was instituted. The test, the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), was a standards-based performance test that provided the benchmark for districts, and initially focused on math, reading, writing, and listening. To give districts

time to align their curriculum with these requirements, no high-stakes consequences were to be instituted until 2008. At the same time that districts were expected to align their curriculum and assessments with the learning requirements, the state also required a standardized norm-referenced test, the ITBS (Iowa Test of Basic Skills) in the non-WASL grades (3, 5, 6, 8, and 9). This test implied a different vision of teaching, one that concentrated on discrete, basic skills.

Within this inconsistent state policy environment, Seattle Public Schools (SPS) developed its own reform agenda to increase student achievement. Seattle, the largest and most diverse school district in the state of Washington, struggled to address significant achievement disparities among different racial groups. Many of Seattle's major reforms had not been directly targeted to instruction, although it was hoped that changes in structures and policies would ultimately produce higher student achievement by creating school environments where educators had the freedom and resources required to address student needs.

### Recent Reforms

Three of the most significant reforms were a mix of authoritative and collaborative-centered efforts:

- 1) numerous attempts in the last 30 years to increase racial integration;
- 2) reorganization of the district to support site-based management; and
- 3) school-based budgeting.

Within this inconsistent state policy environment, Seattle Public Schools (SPS) developed its own reform agenda to increase student achievement.

### *Increase Racial Integration.*

Consistent with the reasoning behind the Brown decision (Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education, 1954) that separate is inherently unequal, Seattle Public Schools has historically taken voluntary steps to reduce the isolation of minority students. Compared to other large urban districts, Seattle generally has lower poverty levels, with only 40 percent of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. However, substantial residential segregation exists, resulting in a clear division between north-end and south-end schools. This division runs along racial, socio-economic, and achievement lines and schools' reputations are shaped by these divisions. Schools in the south-end have predominantly students of color, low achievement, and very high poverty rates. In 1978, the district began busing, based on the "Seattle Plan" for desegregation. A number of court challenges ensued and the policy was eventually replaced with alternative strategies to encourage integration.

Seattle's experiment with busing in the 1970s through the mid-1990s resulted in significant white flight.<sup>8</sup> While whites make up over 70 percent of the city's population (2000 Census), 60 percent of the students in SPS are students of color. Two different task forces, representing a broad spectrum of community groups, called for closer monitoring of student achievement of different racial groups and teacher training in cultural diversity. The district and Seattle Education Association (SEA) held many conversations to help staff rethink their practice in ways that were culturally sensitive. The decision to end busing and institute a choice plan was an acknowledgment that segregation and achievement disparities had not changed. The new approach was to encourage integration by enticing whites to return to the district. At first, the district placed special programs, such as magnets, Spectrum (for mildly/moderately gifted students) and APP (Accelerated Progress Program, for highly gifted students) in predominantly minority (south-end) schools to attract white students.

At the time of the research, SPS prided itself on being a "choice" district, meaning that parents could choose the school they wanted their children to attend. This plan was implemented as an alternative to busing and to create neighborhood schools. Seattle's choice plan was based on a detailed process where race was used as a tie-breaker, giving priority to under-represented racial groups in a school. Since the implementation of the choice policy, racial segregation in the district has

increased. According to the Civil Rights Project at Harvard, in 2002, SPS experienced the ninth largest decline since 1986 in whites' exposure to blacks in urban districts and the fifth lowest exposure to Latinos—both strong indicators of increased segregation. In addition, court challenges questioning the constitutionality of the use of race as a tie-breaker may make it more difficult for the district to address racial integration in the future.

***District Reorganization to Support Site-based Management.*** Another reform developed in response to community concerns was to reorganize the district by significantly reducing the central office staff. A commonly held view was that the Peter Principle was entrenched in the district.<sup>9</sup> One veteran teacher explained the perception:

All a person had to do was bomb in a school and they got a job downtown. And it was played out time and again, and there was a great deal of resentment because of that...and a lot of people felt that people had these little fiefdoms downtown where they hung on to dollars and the program; the dollars were not following the programs.

During the late 1980s, what became known as the Cresip report documented that huge overhead costs were incurred by the district because of the size of the central office staff.<sup>10</sup> Although the reorganization was not directly instructional, the teachers' union, the Seattle Education

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Association, took a leadership role in pushing the district to put more dollars into instructional programs in the schools, such as more Title I services and instructional aides, rather than into administration. The district reorganization severely cut central office staff in curriculum, instruction, and professional development.<sup>11</sup> By making schools responsible for these areas, in theory, decisions could be made by those who knew the children and their needs best. It also assumed that each school had the capacity to make informed decisions and the expertise to design and implement instructional programs tailored to its student population. However, with limited professional development and support for curriculum and instruction at the district level, there was little improvement in student achievement.

***School-based Budgeting.*** To increase equity, to make the budget process more transparent, and to allow schools to design instructional

programs to best meet the needs of their students, the district moved to school-based budgeting. They utilized a weighted student formula: high-needs students—Title I, Special Education, ESL (English as a Second Language)—required more services and thus cost more. In this new budgeting scheme, the dollars followed the student, so schools with a higher proportion of high-needs students received larger per-pupil allocations. While it was the district’s intent that increased funds would help close the achievement gap, the relationship to improve achievement was not direct.

### ***Occasional Experiments with Instruction.***

During the last 20 years, the district invested in a number of instructional programs such as Prescriptive Reading Instruction (PRI)—a computer-based reading program, Proficiency in English Program (PEP), and Acceleration 2000, a computer-aided instructional program. These pilot programs were implemented in only a small number of elementary schools, with minimal support from resource staff, and were short-lived once temporary grant funding ran out. District professional development to support these initiatives was also limited. As one veteran teacher described, “For years, decades, it was ‘Do this’ and then they left you on your own to sink or swim.” Some of the district programs elicited an even more hostile reaction:

Basically we boycotted [the district program] and said we’re not going to do that. It didn’t make sense; it was a waste of time and

money...And so that situation was one where we were done to rather than done with, and it didn’t fly.

## **Overcoming History**

The recent effort to become a standards-based district was one of the first sustained instructional reform efforts with direct attention to teaching and learning. However, the conversations district leaders had about standards were rarely connected to changes in instruction. Rather, standards were generally discussed in terms of students “meeting standards,” as defined by test scores. While the focus on standards provided a unifying theme, the district’s history of fits and starts left principals and teachers skeptical of the district’s commitment and capacity to bring about real change. One central office administrator with a long history in the district explained the challenge:

Standards [are a turning point for the district.] And the real truth of the matter is, that we are not anywhere near bringing students

**While the focus on standards provided a unifying theme, the district’s history of fits and starts left principals and teachers skeptical of the district’s commitment and capacity to bring about real change.**

up to standards. That we have not managed to do much with achievement gaps—little bits and pieces, but overall not. And we can’t keep doing that. We need to pay serious attention to it. I think this is different, and I hope it’s different, in that we will stay the course. We absolutely must stay the course. Because the general impression is sort of, some of that 60 percent in the middle and definitely the 20 percent naysayers think that this too shall pass—because it always has.

Similarly, teachers had trouble trusting that things would be different this time:

You have to fight constantly not to be dumped on. I see it as an adversarial thing in many ways, not as a support thing. I feel like they also do the Lucy and the football thing from Charlie Brown. That reminds me of the district where they say, ‘Oh yeah, this time we really mean it, this time we’re really going to do this.’ And then, everyone gets charged up and I think not so much for me but for a lot of the teachers who are veteran teachers, that’s one of the main problems is getting beyond that thing of ‘Oh, this time we really mean it.’ And people don’t believe that. So getting people going on stuff is really difficult sometimes because of that kind of a relationship that we’ve had with the district.

Some of those responsible for professional development in the content areas saw a need to provide more sustained attention to teaching and learning. One way to focus on instruction was to move beyond the “one-shot workshop” model:

I’m really pushing for us not just offering classes. I think we only reach a very limited number of our staff and I don’t think there’s enough follow-through. So I’m really pushing this year that whatever writing instruction classes we offer, that we offer them in buildings to a whole staff and do follow-up within the building.

In addition to the years of mistrust between the central office and schools, high turnover at the central office level made it difficult to build working relationships and consistent approaches. One central office administrator noted, “I think we’ve re-organized every year I’ve been down here.... My job title has changed four times, five times in seven years.” She went on to explain that there was a lack of historical memory of what has happened before and how difficult it was to adjust to a constantly changing vision:

We’ve had a tremendous turnover in top leadership. We’ve had three superintendents, four chief academic officers, and a while when no one was there. So it’s been challenging. And they come in and they want to have their project, so it’s been very challenging. Each time somebody new comes in, we have to re-educate them on what this is about.

Turnover in leadership made it difficult to maintain a consistent focus; new people brought in their own programs with little attempt to connect with and build upon earlier reform efforts. With this history of mistrust and inconsistent leadership and direction, Seattle Public Schools had to change not only instructional practices and learning outcomes, but also the attitudes of skeptical educators who were asked to carry out the reforms. While teachers and administrators supported the new direction of helping all students meet standards, they wondered whether the district focus and support would last long enough to achieve visible results.

The one recent district strategy that gave schools optimism that they could actually determine what the reform looked like in their own building was the Transformational Academic Achievement Planning process. This was the major district strategy for helping students meet standards, which we discuss in detail later in the paper.

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## District Instructional Initiatives

After years of mistrust between the district and schools, new district policies were beginning to change the relationship between the central office and school sites. Since the late 1990s, the district had responded to increased state and local accountability pressures to raise student achievement by trying to use central office policies to affect improvements in instruction using three major initiatives:

- 1) First, was the drive to become a **standards-based district**—an effort that could potentially have a direct focus on instruction, but lacked depth and specificity.
- 2) The second major policy strategy was the **Transformational Academic Achievement Planning Process**, which indirectly focused on instruction by specifying the goals to be met, and requiring schools to develop plans to achieve them.
- 3) The third policy effort, with the most direct focus on instruction, was through **professional development**.

### 1 Standards-based Reform

During the time of this study, SPS was engaged in an intense reform effort that worked 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 by the superintendent, borrowing from health care reform, as a “tight-loose model.” The model is absolutely clear on the outcomes—every student meeting standards—but the district is 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:

I think the standards drive everything.... I would talk about academic standards, our accountability system, our value-added model, our professional development approaches, our technology system. Those pieces that are embedded within the major institutional infrastructure we’re trying to put in place to support this very outcome-oriented, performance-driven, tight piece.

Within this brief description, the superintendent identified many initiatives—accountability, standards, value-added data analyses, technology—all of which initially required new learning on the part of teachers and administrators to understand the ideas and then to learn to integrate and implement them within their schools and classrooms. Professional development is listed as one of many components, rather than a consistent process needed to ensure that each initiative could be fully realized.

**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.**

Standards-based education is a complex reform effort requiring a new vision of teaching and learning, in-depth content knowledge, and an understanding of the relationship between curriculum, instruction, and assessment. However, a lack of understanding of this complexity of standards-based reform was reflected in the policies and practices across the district. When the superintendent established the goal of becoming a standards-based district by September 1, 2001, no criteria were identified to determine what it meant to be “standards-based.” (Once the deadline had passed, the language changed to Seattle has “defined” itself as a standards-based district.) As a result, the implications for transforming teaching and learning were rarely discussed.

As the first step in developing the standards, district leaders recruited teachers to help identify the content standards that defined what to teach. Their charge was to ensure that district standards were consistent with the state standards in order to prepare students to perform on the

Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). At the time of our data collection, the establishment of content standards was uneven: at the elementary level, standards were identified in all content areas except social studies; at the middle level, there were no standards in science or social studies; at the high school level, they were in place only in writing and math.

Corresponding performance tasks, or classroom-based assessments (CBAs), based on the standards, were developed in writing and math at the elementary and middle levels. These instruments were designed to help teachers monitor student progress toward the standards throughout the year. Although the district strongly recommended that teachers use the CBAs for that purpose, this was not required because of site-based autonomy. We found more consistent use of these performance tasks at the elementary level, but limited use at both the middle and high school level. Even so, Seattle Public Schools set 2004 as the target date by which 80 percent of all students would be meeting standards. In all district communications, “meeting standards” was defined by test scores. On the WASL, the standard for passing was defined by the state. The “standard” identified by the district on the norm-referenced Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) test was the 61<sup>st</sup> percentile. In terms of the “tight-loose” model, the district established the targets, oversaw the development of some tools (the standards and the CBAs), but left it up to the schools to figure out how to use them.

The district consistently communicated that standards provided the target, yet the ability to articulate what standards involved varied even among the central office staff overseeing their implementation. After enumerating the district's priorities as academic achievement, eliminating the achievement gap, safe and clean schools, and each school functioning from a viable academic achievement plan, one central office administrator added to the end of the list, "and the other systems—you know—we have our standards-based learning system...it guides what we do here...just having the standards in place."

Others at the district office clearly articulated the connection between standards, instructional approaches, and assessments, as the following quote demonstrates:

Overarching the whole thing is getting every kid to standards, every kid in every classroom. The actual initiatives are getting teachers to teach the standards and having assessments to match those.

A few central office staff seemed to understand that standards required more than just having specific content goals. One even avoided using the phrase, "standards-based district," because, she explained:

I'm trying not to use jargon. That's said so much that people don't understand what it means. Standards-based, but not uniform.... I think this is confusing to many people because they hear about standards and they think

everyone is going to look and act the same way, and it's entirely not the case. The case is, and the big, big, big function right now is to look at the kids who are left behind. And to find out why and how to serve them better. Because we recognize that we're not there.... We have a very large group that's way below, and in the past that group that's way below basically stayed there. And it starts in kindergarten and it basically gets wider. [Standards make that] no longer acceptable.

Although teacher leaders helped develop the district standards, we found a wide range of understanding about what it meant to teach to the standards. A district specialist, who spent a substantial amount of time in the schools, acknowledged:

Just because the documents exist doesn't necessarily mean that that's where we are. And I think that's a critical issue here. There hasn't been a turning point yet.... Any amount of posters or publications doesn't make the system change.

Another administrator concurred:

We rolled out our standards-based learning system last year. Teachers began working with standards in reading, writing, math, and communications. We have classroom-based assessments. And so teachers were really focused on managing the stuff, and what it is...but they weren't focused on how to do it, and what are the best ways to do it. That question, that piece had not been put together.

These comments underscore 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. At the school level, finding teachers who understood the implications of standards for their teaching was difficult. Some did not like the idea of standards, saying that "teachers have always had standards." Some were not familiar with the standards for their content area, but most felt the standards were relatively easy to address, like this teacher:

People complain about the standards. I like the standards; I think they are fine. When you look at them, *they're not hard to fit into anything*. I mean they're perfectly reasonable as far as I'm concerned.... I don't see what the big deal is (emphasis added).

The standards were so general that it was easy to construe their meaning to fit a range of interpretations. With only limited explanation to help teachers recognize how the new expectations might affect their work, few teachers were challenged to rethink their practice. Although standards were mentioned frequently in terms of what to teach, there was little discussion about standards in relation to how to teach to them. One teacher shared her observations of the introduction of standards in the district:

It was so funny, because for a couple of years the rallying cry was, ‘The standards are coming! The standards are coming!’ And there really was not good PR in terms of what a standard was, or what that meant. Then all of the sudden it was, ‘The standards are here. Get your act together or get out,’ was basically it. That’s basically what the district said to principals and that your school could become a focus of concern. To a principal, that meant, ‘Well, I am not taking the rap for my staff.’ So then the teachers get the news that if we become a focus of concern, you’re—you know. And that’s basically what it was like, and the first year or two nobody really had a sense of—it was not clear I think to a whole lot of people. What is a standard? What’s it for? What does it really mean? To them it was simply, ‘I’ve got to do it or I’m out of here,’ instead of, ‘Okay, now this is why this is a standard and this is what a standard is.’ You know? That was not communicated well at all.

After the standards had been in place for a few years, there was general acceptance of them, but not necessarily any changes in practices at the school level. There were, however, a number of changes at the district level. A standards-based report card was implemented in 2002 at the elementary level after two years of field-testing. At the same time, the district developed a standards-based evalu-

**The district consistently communicated that standards provided the target, yet the ability to articulate what standards involved varied even among the central office staff overseeing their implementation.**

ation system for principals, based on eight standards, one of which was academic achievement. This standard carried as much weight as the other seven combined, accounting for 50 percent of the total score. In 2002, a group of teachers and central office staff, in collaboration with the union, drafted Professional Practice Standards (PPS) for teachers. Designed as a reflective tool for teachers to use to improve their practice, this instrument was not intended to be used for evaluation. Finally, the district’s strategy for addressing the goal of standards was for each school to create a transformation plan. These plans spelled out each school’s strategies for reaching district goals. However, as of 2003, none of these steps produced results in terms of outcomes or “meeting standards.” Based on 2002 achievement levels, which fell far below the standards, the district goals for students were extremely ambitious. (See Seattle Appendix A for 2002 achievement data for the district.)

## **The Transformational Academic Achievement Planning Process**

To guide the standards-based reform, the district designed a Transformational Academic Achievement Planning process to create “reinvented” schools that would help all students meet standards and eliminate the achievement gap between white students and students of color. School transformation was seen as the vehicle for achieving the district’s goals. According to the superintendent:

The transformation effort, in many ways, is sort of mandating that they look with a very critical eye at the school structure that they’ve inherited, and say, ‘You inherited a structure that served some kids. How are you going to change it to a structure that serves every child?’

Guidelines for developing the Transformational Academic Achievement Plans required schools to analyze all available data about their schools. This eight-step process is outlined in Figure 1 on page 74. The plan followed a similar format used in previous years. Nonetheless, this time, both central office and school staff believed that there may be a chance to implement the plans because they had a five-year timeline and resources to support it.

**Figure 1: Guide for Academic Achievement Plans for Accelerated Learning**

1) Develop a school transformation vision. (Describe the kind of school you want to have in the future.)
2) Develop a whole school transformation analysis. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Utilize questions, rubrics, and facilitators.</li> <li>■ Analyze your school status on the attributes of quality, high achievement schools.</li> <li>■ Describe the barriers that might impede your progress.</li> </ul>
3) Analyze achievement data. (Effective plans are based on an array of data, both school and classroom.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Use “School Effectiveness Profile Data” (provided by district).</li> <li>■ Consider “Recommendation for Developing the Summary of Data” (provided by district).</li> <li>■ Provide a School Summary of Data.</li> </ul>
4) Review the six district priorities. Plans should support the district priorities (goals).
5) Set 3-5 Accelerated Improvement Goals that are specific, significant, measurable, achievable, and include a clear target date. Three goals were required: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ One goal related to accelerated academic achievement</li> <li>■ One goal related to eliminating the achievement gap</li> <li>■ One goal related to the implementation of attributes of quality high achievement schools</li> </ul>
6) Select strategies to achieve each goal. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ State the supporting data and rationale/research that support selection of each strategy.</li> </ul>
7) Decide on action steps to implement strategies. Each action step needs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ A timeline</li> <li>■ Person(s) responsible</li> <li>■ Evidence of periodic monitoring of progress</li> <li>■ Professional Development Needs</li> <li>■ Costs and funding resources</li> </ul>
8) Identify system-wide changes needed to support your plan.

Source: SPS

Much of this work was propelled by a \$26 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. According to many school leaders, what made this plan different was the money from Gates to actually do it. One school leader stated:

I guess the biggest concern I have, people have, is that we’re going to do the Transformation, and all of a sudden next year we have to write another one, and next year another one. Every year you write a new one and you never get one done. That’s what’s happened to me ever since I got in this district. I’ve written more of those things and I’ve never even seen one finished. This actually has some teeth in it in because we have Gates money supporting it.

Although the foundation encouraged the district to develop its own approach, the Gates Foundation provided exposure to reform ideas, such as the seven attributes of high achievement schools (See Figure 2 on page 75). In response, the district developed a self-evaluation tool for schools to assess their current status on each of the attributes. Schools were then expected to address their weakest areas. In addition, in their transformation plans, schools had to develop specific strategies for addressing the district’s top two goals: raising academic achievement so that all students meet standards, and eliminating the achievement gap. Schools also had to identify professional development needed to help staff acquire the knowledge and skills to carry out the strategies.

The five-year timeline and annual reviews forced schools to remain focused on the goal of 80 percent of all students meeting standards by 2004. Toward that end, Seattle Public Schools created a process and a set of tools to help the schools develop comprehensive plans for raising student achievement. These tools included rubrics to assess their school's standing on each attribute, data analysis workshops, templates for the plan format, and "Look-Fors" in the review process. Although the district policies for the transformation planning process did not directly address instruction in any specific way, they were clearly intended to push schools to focus on improving teaching and learning.

The review process was established to ensure that school budgets and

### Figure 2: Attributes of High Achievement Schools

- Common Focus
- High Expectations
- Personalized
- Respect and Responsibility
- Time to Collaborate
- Performance Based
- Technology as a Tool

Source: Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

professional development plans were aligned with their stated goals and strategies. The review teams, led by the director responsible for that school, included representatives from key departments such as special education, bilingual/ESL, Title I, and curriculum specialists. In this way, each district representative could monitor that the needs of their constituent group were addressed in the school's plan. This "authoritative-centered" approach was for the most part characterized by one-way communication from the central office to schools.

Schools were expected to identify areas of need, an instructional focus—usually math or literacy, and to commit to professional development to strengthen instruction in that targeted area. One of the "Look-Fors" in the review process was to look for an alignment between the professional development plans and the academic achievement goals. This demonstrated district recognition of the need for specialized professional development to support the transformation process, but the schools were responsible for identifying or designing their own program. And for the first time, the schools had the resources to pay for that professional development from the Gates grant. In some cases, the schools were able to take advantage of district professional development offerings, such as the Literacy Initiative, to advance their site-based plans.

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### 3 Professional Development: A Major District Tool for Implementing Reform

One of the major ways in which the district provided support for instructional improvement was through professional development. The district arranged professional development in several formats for different constituent groups. A new professional development director was hired during the course of the study and a district approach or strategic plan for professional development had not yet been developed. However, a number of individual initiatives were already in place. Some of these initiatives focused directly on instruction in content areas, while others had only an indirect influence.

Table 1 lists the most prominent professional development efforts in the district, their instructional focus, the provider, funding source, and target audience. Brief descriptions of each initiative are included in Seattle Appendix B. As the table indicates, most of the initiatives were designed and taught by external providers with

grant funds. The elementary science program, begun in 1997, provided a new model of in-depth professional development that included intensive study of content, modeling and opportunities to experience as well as practice inquiry-based science. There was also ongoing support for teachers as they tried to implement what they had learned back in their

classrooms. During the period of this study, the Literacy Initiative was the top district priority. It was also the first K-12 initiative targeted to teachers in all content areas. Although not as in-depth as the science initiative, this represented a new level of commitment to instruction and professional development in the district.

**Table 1. Major Professional Development Initiatives**

Initiative	Instructional Focus	Provider	Funding Source	Target Audience	Duration
Literacy Initiative	Reading and writing strategies	National Urban Alliance	Grant from the Alliance	All K-12 teachers	72 hours
Elementary NSF Science	Hands-on, inquiry-based science	University of Washington	NSF grant	Elementary teachers	100 hours
Mathematics	Leadership for math reform and constructivist math instruction	University of Washington	NSF grant	Elementary, middle, and high school in two-year cycles	Variable
New Teacher Academy and STAR Mentor Program	Teaching basics, management, introduce Professional Practice Standards	District and the teachers' union	State Teacher Assistance Program	First-year teachers and veterans who seek this out or are referred to it	One year
Teacher Consultants	Standards, literacy, and math	District	State, levy funds, district	Building-based support	Variable
Summer Institute	Varied menu; most content areas, diversity	District	District	Open to all, mostly elementary attend	One week of 2-3 hour classes
Building Leadership Team Training	Not instructional; decision-making process	Adaptive Schools	Broad grant	Building Leadership Teams	3-4 sessions
Principal Leadership Institute	Usually indirectly related to instruction	The Alliance: guest speakers	The Alliance	Principals	4 days/year

## Communicating and Implementing District Instructional Initiatives

**T**he three initiatives discussed previously (standards-based reform, the Transformational Academic Achievement Planning process, and professional development) represented significant investments and changes in the ways the district worked with schools. As the district negotiated new relationships with schools, how the new policies were interpreted varied, depending on one's position. This analysis looks first at the district's perspective of its reform policies and then examines the same policies from the schools' point of view.

From the district's perspective, they set the goals and developed an infrastructure, including the development of grade-level standards and accompanying classroom-based assessments. They provided schools with the raw materials (data) to make informed decisions. Further, district administrators provided support, often in the form of tools to facilitate the school's transformation, but schools maintained substantial autonomy because they controlled their own budgets and professional development decisions. The major vehicle for communicating the district's position and policies for reform was through principals or district-sponsored professional development,

and as a result, did not necessarily reach all teachers. Further, the emphasis on test scores as a synonym for standards contributed to a superficial understanding of standards reform. This did, however, provide a consistent message, create a sense of urgency, and put considerable pressure on principals and teachers.

### Communication of District Policies

In a site-based district, tensions inevitably arise over district requirements and which decisions schools can make for themselves. Whether district policies are viewed as pressure or support is often determined by the nature and direction of the communication. In Seattle, district policies may have originated from different units within the central office but they were usually communicated to the schools through the principals. On the other hand, teachers rarely saw central office personnel, other than occasional teacher consultants. Principals had the most contact with central office staff, mainly because they attended a number of meetings. District policies were communicated at these meetings, either by distribut-

ing memos or by explaining guidelines and tools to facilitate the local school planning process.

Examples of such policy instruments include the standards-based principal evaluation, the transformation plan guidelines, templates, and self-assessment rubrics. Schools had little or no input into the design of these instruments. Indeed, we learned that some schools were strongly discouraged from deviating at all from the district's format.

### Principal/Central Office Director Relations in the Transformation Process

The principals' primary contact person was the "director"—a district staff member who was also their evaluator. The amount of contact was limited. Directors had two primary roles: one was to coach principals in learning to run an efficient school and providing instructional leadership; and the other role was to supervise and evaluate the principals' performance. One director explained her role as "the principal of the principals." Directors also conducted cluster administrative meetings and, as members of the senior management team, the directors met weekly with the district's teaching and learning division.

All of the directors indicated their workloads were so great that they couldn't be in schools as much as they would like. The number of schools each director supervised varied by level: at the elementary level, directors supervised approximately

**The emphasis on test scores as a synonym for standards contributed to a superficial understanding of standards reform.**

18 schools, and approximately 10 at both the middle and high school levels. Directors were required to formally observe each school twice per-year. Only one of these visits had to include classroom observations; the other was to observe a principal conducting a staff meeting. When asked how much time they spent in schools, directors ranged from two-and-a-half days to less than one day a week. One director admitted that she could not get into classrooms at every school because of the workload, and often she had to rely on the principal's word for most of the school's observation. She told us, "I have to admit I don't know the teachers in my schools."

Only one of the five directors we interviewed spent a significant amount of her time in schools (50 percent), and even then, not in all schools. This director found she had to prioritize and she admittedly only spent a significant amount of time in the neediest schools. Not only were the directors' two roles sometimes in conflict, their work was further complicated by the wide range of needs across the principal population. She found that some principals could figure it out for themselves and some needed step-by-step instruction. As a result, she lamented, "We don't get very much in-depth. Sometimes I worry is it really superficial, will some of them get it or will it just kind of go in a pile?"

This same director was the only one who described her interaction with schools to be at least in part around instruction. She noted that her

most important coaching role was around analyzing data. Her focus was making sure that they didn't run away from their data, but rather look closely at all segments of their population. But as far as curriculum and instruction were concerned, she acknowledged that her role was less pronounced. What she did provide to principals was a framework to help them assess their literacy program, identifying the key components:

I see myself giving them the structure or the framework or resources for them to evaluate but not to provide the instruction. So if they need help—say if they don't know if they can go in and observe a reading lesson and know whether it is good—I would then pair them up with one of the reading specialists that works on my team and say go out and coach this principal as to what they should look for.

The conflict between the director's two roles (coaching and supervision) was exacerbated by time constraints. Teachers and administrators needed time to learn new practices and they

needed assistance from someone more expert to provide feedback and suggestions as they experimented. Without those critical resources, one director indicated her greatest challenge was changing adult behavior quickly enough:

We need to accelerate our adult learning. And we're trying to keep school running while we're doing all of this transforming. So a parent who has a 6<sup>th</sup> grader might say, 'By the time you all get transformed, my kid won't be there any more.' And they are right. It's impossible to change fast enough. At the same time, we know people have to have some time for making change and so it's a real tension.

All central office staff recognized that the district must provide principal and instructional supports. However, not all in the central office recognized that the district lacked the capacity to provide the level of support needed to help teachers in every school and every classroom improve their practice. The principals' training included only limited attention to focused instructional coaching. Some in the central office did not recognize the need for additional support, believing that it was already in place:

In this district, there is a real effort to provide the support to meet those standards that we're asking people to attain. So they're not just being hung out there. We're going to ask you to do it, we're going to test you on it, but we're also going to support you to get there.

**Not all in the central office recognized that the district lacked the capacity to provide the level of support needed to help teachers in every school and every classroom improve their practice.**

And in return for that support and flexibility, this district leader felt school staff should be held accountable:

That really gets to the crux of the problem. This is a site-based district. This is something that buildings and teachers have wanted; they want control of the dollars that come to their building. But with that comes responsibility. The assessments are tied to the standards. And we'll actually be looking at whether schools are teaching to the standards. And that responsibility part, it's really the only thing that's causing change at this point. And it's making people nervous.

Principals were nervous because their evaluation was based almost exclusively on test scores, rather than the total culture of the school. We learned that the "looking" that this district leader mentioned rarely involved actual observations of classrooms. One principal described the level of involvement from her director:

[My director has] come in a few times. I think the intent was to come in more often, watch our staff meetings, looking at classrooms, make sure everyone is doing standards-based, very professional practices. I don't think it's really happened, because if it were happening they wouldn't have to require us to do this horrendous amount of work on our portfolio. And now we have to summarize all the standards two through seven. It's like a principal knows a good classroom—you can see within 20 minutes, are there structures in

**The most prominent message was that schools would be held accountable for raising test scores, but very few of the district policies were targeted directly at improving teaching and learning.**

place, are there routines in place, are kids being challenged. I mean you would see that. But I just think that's missing. I think they're [central office] out of touch.... So connection with downtown?—I think there is a disconnect.

In this results-oriented district, the rationale for most reform policies revolved around raising student achievement and/or eliminating the achievement gap; the bottom line for most accountability measures was framed in terms of test scores. Whether perceived as pressure or support depended in part on the strength of the relationship between individual principals and directors. These relations were generally quite distant, with limited working relationships or face-to-face interaction, other than formal meetings where directors set the agenda. The most prominent message was that schools

would be held accountable for raising test scores, but very few of the district policies were targeted directly at improving teaching and learning.

The district provided each school with a compilation of data that added up to their "Effectiveness Profile." The "Effectiveness Profile" was seven pages of easy-to-read bar graphs and charts that summarized the school's test scores, staff survey, student and staff attendance, and discipline. The charts also provided comparisons between this year's performance to previous years and to the district standard. Five of the seven pages were based on test scores. Moreover, in only 10 of 30 central office interviews did any of the district staff discuss accountability in broader terms than test scores.

Before one can expect test scores to improve, teachers need opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills to change their instruction. Few in the central office focused on that important step in addressing student achievement. For example, one director recounted what she thought about when evaluating a principal:

Has the school made satisfactory progress towards the district's standards on the school effectiveness profile? Have they made satisfactory progress on the school's establishing goals in their academic achievement plan? Have they made progress in terms of value-added assessment? Have they reduced disproportionality?

This focus on test scores contrasted with some central office administrators who felt there had been a shift in the central office in the last three years from compliance monitoring to more of a coaching role. Whether schools or principals experienced any shift depended on individual relationships with specific people in the central office—namely, their director or the skills of consultants who worked in their school. Some directors seemed to understand the perspectives of principals who struggled to be instructional leaders while managing a host of other responsibilities. A few in the central office acknowledged that the central office transformation was not complete and that there were growing pains as they tried to move to this new model:

We're steeply challenged in our central leadership now just with the newness of the team. There's a whole lot of team-building and chemistry-finding and resolution of personal styles and communication structures that we're having to make up on the fly.

**Professional development was one area where most schools felt the district was doing a much better job, both in terms of the quality of its major initiatives and in the additional support from teacher consultants.**

Even though the most emphatic message was that schools would be held accountable for raising test scores, very few of the district policies had a significant impact on improving teaching and learning. The notable exception was some of the district's professional development programs, especially those that had a long-term, district-wide focus.

### **Professional Development as a Tool for Transformation**

Professional development was one area where most schools felt the district was doing a much better job, both in terms of the quality of its major initiatives and in the additional support from teacher consultants. Secondary teachers were less satisfied with both the content and the amount of district support, but the grant money allowed them to secure outside assistance. Schools cited the quality of the Literacy Initiative and the National Science Foundation science training as examples of how professional development had improved in recent years. Moreover, the district used professional development as a major forum to communicate policy messages in-depth, directly to teachers.

Although the expectations articulated in the standards were compiled in a notebook, few teachers studied them unless they were highlighted as a tool in professional development sessions. For example, in the case of the writing standards, workshops on six-trait writing introduced teachers to the cri-

teria that would be used to grade student performance on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning. The district's Direct Writing Assessment (DWA) modeled a similar process, providing teachers and students with opportunities to practice the skills assessed on the state test. In schools, teacher consultants provided additional modeling and reinforcement for implementing standards-based instruction in writing. Through these sources of support, district expectations were brought to life.

The strength of the individual professional development offerings was sometimes quite high, but there was no overarching umbrella to integrate them. As one district leader indicated, there was a lack of leadership and vision at the district level:

They have a lot of really good ideas. But they lack coordination and organization. And so you have a million different ideas with no follow-through. And you have many different schools doing many different things and there's no focus. Hopefully the transformation initiative will help in that respect. But there's not enough leadership and focus. And we take on too many things. But the ideas are good ideas and well-intentioned. There's just no follow-through.

This leadership confusion resulted from Seattle's professional development being either subject-specific and/or site-based. As a result, the

**The lack of coordination and focus in professional development also led to some confusion as to just what the district's priorities were.**

major initiatives were not all coordinated under the director of professional development, even within the central office. Major grant-funded initiatives had their own directors and were housed in different units. The Reading Curriculum Coordinator and the National Urban Alliance (NUA) coordinated the Literacy Initiative. The University of Washington coordinated the National Science Foundation (NSF) science initiative and the NSF math initiative as part of a five-district collaborative venture. The standards consultants worked under the director of professional development, as did the teacher development coordinator and the leadership development coordinator. Content-area consultants, on the other hand, worked under their curriculum areas.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, even those responsible for professional development recognized that there was no overall strategic plan for professional learning:

I think there's a lot of interest in trying to form one. I don't think we have a plan. The problem I see is that everybody's got their own plan. The literacy people have their own plan. The math people have their plan. The diversity people have their plan. And what we keep saying, this is a recurring theme I've heard for six years now 'We need to focus.' Ha! We've got people who say 'We need to have curriculum mapping; we need to have standards training. We need to have this and we need to have this....' But until somebody says, 'We don't have to do this'—we won't have that focus.

For a professional development administrator, this fragmentation remained a constant challenge:

It's an accepted frustration and challenge, both in terms of every externally-funded initiative comes with its own conceptions, strengths, and objectives (and that those never mesh seamlessly with institutional direction) and with the organizational byproduct of there being independent coordinators or project managers or whatever else—depending upon those people it'll be more or less a fiefdom kind of thing.

Because the professional development was not coordinated, not all offerings reinforced the district content or professional practice standards. Since participation was almost always voluntary, there was

a lack of consistency from one teacher's understanding to the next, and because the district was trying to move so fast on so many fronts, teachers rarely had the opportunity to develop sufficient expertise in any one area. One administrator acknowledged that the district was asking a great deal from teachers:

Schools have a lot of things to learn about. A year ago [1999] they were spending their learning time on how to implement standards. Now we want them to spend learning time on how do we implement standards and really get to a point of administering the CBAs [Classroom Based Assessments] and having common planning time where teachers talk about student work. And then on top of that we're asking them to learn about 'highly capable,' what do you do for kids who are three years behind, how do you accelerate learning. And so it's like there's this huge list of things our people need to learn about and, with full-time jobs, there's just so many hours you can give to that.

The lack of coordination and focus in professional development also led to some confusion as to just what the district's priorities were. Perspectives within the central office ranged from a belief that there was no "single unified priority" to some district administrators who understood the ultimate objectives and were able to make connections between all the district

initiatives to help the school leaders and teachers see the connective thread. For example, one administrator said:

The thing about all of this is there's just one thing that we're doing, and that's academic achievement for all students. That's the one thing we're doing. But everything, what we need to be able to articulate, is how all of those things, all the things we're doing in the district, all those arrows are pointing toward academic achievement.

In addition, the district's capacity to provide sufficient support for all of these efforts was limited:

What we're finding is we have to build some infrastructure to be able to support the schools' transformation...because we don't have enough people. The idea would be to have a curriculum person in each building that could service their own building and teachers. But quite frankly, we don't have that capacity that we can do that yet.

A small number of teacher consultants were one of the major "tools" the district used to support instructional improvement in these areas. The number of consultants was quite limited and the quality of the consultants varied considerably. We observed that the "good" ones were valued help in schools, but not all of them were considered good. When a school had a bad experience with their assigned consultant, teachers tended to withdraw from the project and the school had trouble recruiting new teachers to participate the fol-

lowing year. Some consultants were rarely called on for assistance, while others were spread too thin, because they had to serve too many schools. Elementary literacy specialists each had to support 23 schools. Thus, they could not provide the consistent level of support needed to help teachers change their practice. For example, a literacy specialist stated:

With 23 schools, it was, I would say, impossible to be effective. I was effective in some, and I feel really good about it. But there are some I just feel frustrated.

A professional development administrator understood the limitations of the current system, but knew that his vision for a quality program would require many more resources:

I'm biased that professional development is under-resourced. I think that's one of our biggest challenges in schools is to find the time—most especially the time, but also the money, the financial resource, to really take it seriously. I continue to maintain that until we've got roughly 20 percent of a teacher's professional life dedicated to reflection, strategic thinking, collegial collaboration, and ongoing learning, we're not there. We're just not there. We can't be the kind of high-performance organization we need to be. That's what it's going to take, in my mind. So we've got a long ways to go, and we're not even close as far as resources go.

The issues surrounding professional development were similar to persisting challenges in central office/school relations. There were positive

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signs that the district was aware of the need to be more responsive in their approach to supporting schools. One significant development during the district's transformation process was the establishment of a central office transformation task force. This group came about largely because of the Gates Foundation presentation of indicators of high-achieving districts, including distributed leadership, shared values, effective governance, quality staff development, and performance accountability. Some initial discussions among senior staff about these attributes, coupled with a barrage of complaints from principals around workload issues, led to the creation of a forum to address those concerns.

Every department in the central office called the school's point person—the principal—with questions: everything from discipline data, to bus schedules, to budget figures for special education, to human resources requests for payroll questions. Some of the directors, who saw themselves as advocates for the principals and

who were in a position to see the demands of the job, asked that the first task force issue be how the central office could streamline requests and coordinate management deadlines so that principals could devote more time to instruction. This task force lasted only a few months and their deliberations were not made public. Although participants in the central office felt a great deal had been accomplished, a principal on the task force felt little had changed. Certainly principals in the schools indicated they experienced little relief from central office demands.

Again, how district professional development policies were communicated played a critical role in shaping the relationships between the central office and schools. Policy directives delivered as mandates might stimulate compliance if perceived as a threat, such as the principal's evaluation. However, when schools were given the resources to implement directives and some choice in shaping their own approach, they were usually willing to comply. When professional development gave teachers tools (instructional strategies) they could use, they were pleased. Thus, how central office policies were relayed often influenced their enactment at the school level. A number of factors contributed to schools' interpretation of the policies, including: the source of the message (person or office), the substance of the message, the timing, and the opportunity for interpretation or input from the schools in response.

## School Perspective on District's Instructional Priorities

Principals indicated that there was very little substantive conversation from district administrators about teaching and learning. In fact, most principals felt their directors did not really "know" the character and culture of their schools. They knew their data, but did not spend enough time in the schools to see what happened in classrooms. Consequently, schools interpreted many of the district policies as shallow and uninformed. The notable exception was the district's professional development programs, especially those with a long-term district-wide focus. Schools were less concerned about the "top-down" direction of reform policies when they experienced quality support for implementing new practices; without support, some policies were ignored. When district directives were confus-

Schools were less concerned about the "top-down" direction of reform policies when they experienced quality support for implementing new practices; without support, some policies were ignored.

ing or viewed as an unfunded mandate, schools complained about their lack of input. Overall, the predominance of the "authoritative centered" one-way communication limited the schools' opportunity to have a voice in shaping district policy. As a result, the perspectives of those at the school level differed significantly from those at the district office.

## The Transformation Process in the Context of Standards

Beginning in November 2000, schools were charged with reinventing themselves. The major vehicle for creating a "new" school was the Transformational Academic Achievement Planning Process. Each school was given a planning budget funded by a generous grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The district provided a three-page guide to developing *Academic Achievement Plans for Accelerated Learning*. To help all students meet standards, the district asked schools to design "a carefully crafted school academic achievement plan for accelerated learning to help school staff focus their knowledge, creativity, energy and resources of time and budget toward specific goals for student success." The plan was intended to be comprehensive, including strategies for targeted populations, extended learning opportunities, professional development, parent involvement, technology, budget, and staffing.

The district gave schools guidelines or a road map outlined in Figure 1, page 74, to help them through the transformation process. The seven attributes for high achievement schools, as identified by the Gates Foundation, became the focus of a self-assessment tool (see Figure 2, page 75). To further assist schools, the district put out a list of “approved” consultants whom the schools could hire for help with the process. However, the only training the district provided the consultants was an overview of the seven attributes. Some schools either had the internal capacity or their own resource people to assist them.

Throughout the process, the one consistent message was that the plans had to address the district’s top two goals: raising academic achievement and eliminating the achievement gap. The criteria for both were test score improvement. To school administrators, the district message rarely went beyond the mantras, “Every child meeting standards in every school,” and “We are very clear about the what—the goal that everyone has to meet, but we leave it up to the schools to figure out the ‘how.’” Principals indicated there was very little substantive conversation about teaching and learning. Most principals felt their directors did not spend enough time in the schools to know what was happening in classrooms. The one notable exception was in a school where the principal was proactive in showcasing the good

things that were happening in her school. In that case, the principal readily acknowledged that her director thought the school was further along than they really were, because of what the principal selectively “showed off.” This principal was well aware that the good practices were not as widespread as she would like.

### ***School Capacity and Support***

***from External Partners.*** 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” (Wenger, 1998) or if the school was part of another project that provided technical assistance. Communities of practice, according to Wenger, are “places” where participants are committed to changing their practice and possess a:

...combination of three fundamental elements: a *domain* of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a *community* of people who care about this domain; and the shared *practice* that they are developing to be effective in their domain (p. 27, emphasis in original).

Schools in the district quite often looked to outsiders to provide leadership, professional development, and technical assistance. Astute school leaders, concerned that there was no strategic plan connecting all of the district initiatives, provided leader-

ship by finding a way for teachers to shape a coherent path for professional learning at the school level.

One principal in our sample explained how she tried to make sure that everything she asked teachers to do would count for at least four things. This school was part of the ATLAS project, and study groups had been part of the school’s culture for many years.<sup>13</sup> When the Professional Practice Standards were introduced in the district, she found a way to embed this new element into the ongoing work at the school. For example, she encouraged the focus of study groups to be based on a group of teachers’ shared professional growth needs that could also be used for their official evaluation. They could use one of the Professional Practice Standards as a reflection tool to further their work. Then any additional professional development they participated in should support the same objectives. That way, teachers wouldn’t feel so overloaded and they would be able to have an in-depth focus in one area.

As demonstrated in this example, the strength of leadership in the school was an important factor in determining the school’s ability to use district policies to further school goals and to mobilize the resources (human and fiscal) needed to build communities of practice and create a vision that motivated the community to engage in new ideas about instructional practice.

**For schools that looked to the district for guidance, the constant revisions in the tools created frustration. Others became discouraged with the amount of confusion that surrounded the entire process.**

One of the schools in our sample was part of two different initiatives that already had the school moving toward transforming instructional practices before the introduction of the district's transforming program. The external project facilitator provided leadership by adjusting their process to incorporate all of the district's requirements so that the boundaries were blurred between district and project objectives. The school's transformation plan blended together multiple efforts into one unified vision around literacy. Study groups, which had been in place for several years through the ATLAS project, became one more vehicle for strengthening literacy practices across the curriculum. They used their transformation grant money to support a literacy specialist to assist in classrooms, and the Nesholm

grant provided the time and technical assistance needed to "do the work" outlined in their plan.<sup>14</sup>

The other ATLAS school in our sample also had an established tradition of collaboration and an effective decision-making structure with a strong Building Leadership Team (BLT). When the transformation policy was instituted, the principal recruited her district director to guide them through the process. In this school, where staff had a commitment to ongoing improvement, they were able to build the transformation process into the structures they already had in place. The principal entrusted the transformation process to the BLT. The strength of community within this school enabled the staff to find ways to interpret the district requirements that fit into their school's culture:

The fact that we've kind of got this critical mass of teachers that are real serious about what they do and really care about what they're doing and put in the time and put in the effort. New staff comes in and you get sucked into that vortex of really caring and really being professional, the same way that new kids that come in third grade are sucked into this vortex of actually showing respect for all the people around you and helping each other at recess and so on. . . . And, I mean, a lot of this has to do with structures that are organized to support the teachers from the top down in our building.

Although it required a significant amount of work, the transformation planning process at this school was viewed as productive and not overly burdensome, despite the lack of district support.

At schools that lacked a collaborative community, the transformation process was overwhelming. Although the tools provided by the district were sometimes helpful, they were rarely timely. Schools that were already moving along with their plans found that the district tools usually arrived too late to be helpful, as they had already developed their own procedure and completed much of the process. For schools that looked to the district for guidance, the constant revisions in the tools created frustration. Others became discouraged with the amount of confusion that surrounded the entire process:

The transformation process was rolled out without clear directions from the beginning. And the forms keep changing. We didn't have the expertise and support like the Nesholm schools to know what to do with it. I don't know why it was that confusing. I guess because I thought there was going to be new information they were going to be giving us, and it never came.

Another principal finally decided not to worry about the district's inability to make up its mind:

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, budget for hiring, for instructional leadership, and you can't do it all. There's just no way.

Rather than respond to each new district priority, this principal chose to stay focused on the school's goals. Once the district finally determined which of the many policy mandates was the top priority, then she would review the school's plan to ensure there was alignment. Another principal assumed a similar stance saying, "We didn't let the district 'look-fors' dictate our work. We looked at our own needs first."

In the end, the review of schools' transformation plans focused on the district's top two goals and aligning their professional development plans with the school's strategies for achieving those goals. Because this focus was "required," some felt that they did not really have complete control of their own plans. One teacher consultant summarized the problem created by inconsistent or conflicting policy messages that undermined leadership at the school level:

If you're telling schools, 'You need to look at your data, you need to determine what you need to do,' and then you turn around and say, 'But we're going to impose on that some other district things that you must do,' we're not letting the process do it. And so I think the best thing we could do

is continue to be out there making schools aware of the resources that are available. But really the whole point of transformation is a self-reflection at a school on what do they need to do. And if they don't know what they need to do then we need to have someone come in and help them come to an awareness of the issues within the school.

One of the principals had a similar take on the contradictions in district policy:

At the same time that they ask you to think out of the box, they are also becoming more and more prescriptive. Now they are coming up with a list of 'look-fors' so that when we turn in our plans, they want to make sure that every school has a goal on this and a goal on that.

**"At the same time that they ask you to think out of the box, they are also becoming more and more prescriptive. Now they are coming up with a list of 'look-fors' so that when we turn in our plans, they want to make sure that every school has a goal on this and a goal on that."**

Moreover, the historical legacy of mistrust and skepticism seemed to predispose schools to question the district's motivation and capacity to see this reform through. Because of the Gates funds and Gates' influence, many in the schools viewed this reform as coming from outside the district. They wondered who was really in charge. Some assumed that the Foundation was leading the district:

Thank heavens for Bill Gates and not just for giving the district the money, but for being on top of how that money was going to be used and for taking a real active part in making sure that this plan was going to happen. And having the insight to know that real reform cannot happen in one or two or even three years—that it's a five-year process.

Further, they were concerned that because the district had predetermined goals (raising student achievement and eliminating the achievement gap), the school's autonomy would be undermined. This was particularly true at the high school level, where every school was compelled to focus on creating small schools to make the student's educational experience more personalized (one of the Gate's attributes). Those suspicions challenged the principal's leadership skills. For instance, one principal had to cajole teachers to trust that this plan was truly their own:

There was some controversy about why we're doing it, and I had to reinforce, 'No, we don't have to do this. We're doing this for our benefit. It's not because of the Gates money we're doing this.' You know, some people said, 'Well, this is another thing it's making us do, isn't it?' I said, 'No, it's not from the district.' You know, that's why some teachers feel that way, especially your more senior teachers, because they've been through this so many times. Every time they turn around the district says, 'You need to do this, this, and this if you want to do this,' and so they feel like they're being mandated to. And, 'No, this is not a mandate. This is something we're choosing to do ourselves,' and so it gives it a little different feel to it.

Once that was clear, the staff agreed: "Oh, okay. That's different."

Principals had to exert considerable leadership to integrate multiple agendas to create coherence for their staff and to build ownership at the school level, which was often difficult to accomplish on a broad scale. Overall, we found mixed reactions to the entire Transformational Academic Achievement Planning Process. Besides the bureaucratic issues, most felt test scores were all that mattered. School leaders felt that no one cared how you got there if your test scores

**In the end, even though many questioned the district's commitment, they acknowledged that the process was good for their school.**

were good—if you were teaching to standards, using the adopted curriculum or the classroom-based assessments, or anything else. Those who held this perspective cited the way the district's policies were relayed to the schools and the district's failure to model what they are asking the schools to do. The entire school was required to be involved in the process of creating a vision of the school they wanted to become and then developing a plan to get there. At the same time, the district had not allowed the schools to be included in determining the goals or the process for the transformation.

While many remained skeptical, especially at the high school level, others believed that the purpose of the transformation process was to require schools to be thoughtful and systematic about analyzing problems, and to be intentional about addressing them. These people generally believed that if you focus on the areas of greatest need, test scores will go up.

***The Positives of the Transformation Process.*** In the end, even though many questioned the district's commitment, they acknowledged that the process was good for their school. In most cases, it involved a larger number of teachers in the development of the academic achievement plans than in the past and created an instructional focus. A number of teacher leaders who truly embraced the effort emerged at several schools. In those cases, leadership at the school site was able to generate ownership and commitment to carrying out their plans. The following teacher expressed this new optimism:

That's what I see as the difference; I think we're moving somewhere. Whether we get there or not is another question, but I feel the movement, which I never thought. Before, I wasn't thinking that the school was going to change. I was thinking that my curriculum might improve and that my teaching might get better, but I never thought that what was around me would change that much. Now I think there's some possibility that what's around me will change. I never saw that as a possibility before.

One principal agreed that the process had built ownership of their school's plan, "It has really gotten things focused on academics and, particularly, literacy."

## Professional Development as a Vehicle for Improving Instruction: A High Point

From the schools' point of view, professional development was one of the high points in the district's reform. Even as the central office was struggling to develop a coherent plan to support professional learning, for the most part, schools agreed with the central office that professional development was a positive strategy for improving student achievement. Most agreed that professional development had improved significantly in recent years. Some attributed these improvements to the example set by the National Science Foundation (NSF) science grant, where the University of Washington designed an intensive program for elementary teachers:

I think the district is getting better at providing the kind of assistance that we want. And the quality of people is good, getting better. The trick is that the model, which I think when you look back, it all kind of stems from the National Science Foundation model. You know, you pay teachers to get trained, you give them ongoing training throughout the year, no one-shot deals, and you provide technical assistance. People to come and check in with you. And it works. And that's basically, with a few minor alterations here and there, the same model that's being used now for literacy.

Once again, this points to the importance of external partners in helping to shape the reform agenda.

Once again, this points to the importance of external partners in helping to shape the reform agenda. The change in approach was welcomed, especially among veteran teachers who had suffered through years with either bad or no staff development at all:

I think they're finally (and I do mean finally), finally starting to support in a more comprehensive way. For years, decades, it was 'Do this,' and then left you on your own, sink or swim. The last few years they have been offering more support than ever in areas of professional development.... I think they're hiring more quality people to come out and be available to schools.

In contrast to the 1980s and 1990s, when Seattle provided minimal support for curriculum and instruction, as Table 1 (page 76) illustrates, the professional learning opportunities were expanding. Two initiatives, in particular, seemed to be both well-received and making a significant difference in instructional practices. Both had the important qualities of being long-term investments with

a team of colleagues who also provided ongoing support to help teachers internalize new approaches. The first was the NSF science program; the other was the Literacy Initiative. At the elementary level, the science program was particularly noteworthy. Many schools went from teaching almost no science to a full-year of inquiry-based science instruction. One lead teacher noticed the difference:

I think the largest impact has been with NSF Science, because it really changed how people teach science and that's been positive.... The content has been wonderful.

Another teacher observed, "I think kids have more hands-on opportunities, they also have an opportunity to demonstrate what they know and how they know it, which is a critical piece for learning and for assessment."

Similarly, the Literacy Initiative seemed to fill a major need in the district. Although the connection to standards was not explicit, it certainly fit under the district's broad standards, such as "Students will understand and use different skills and strategies to read," or "Students understand the meaning of what is read." Most teachers found the literacy strategies to be very effective in helping students in all the content areas. Principals, central office staff, and teachers commented on how the conversations continued back in schools after Saturday workshops:

I just hear it informally, people saying, ‘Wow, I tried such-and-such thinking map and it really worked.’ You really do hear it. But I’m not surprised because my own experience has been at secondary level. That was always an area that teachers wanted the most help with. And when they got it, they were so thrilled to be able to have some techniques to try. And I thought it was only because they were secondary teachers, but what I’m finding is it’s the same with elementary. We all think that elementary teachers have all of this through their teacher training, and the reality is that they don’t.... And they’re as excited as my middle school teachers used to be about it. Because it’s such little things that make such a big difference in teaching a lesson—I think it’s been good.

Teachers agreed that the literacy strategies were permeating schools, especially when a majority of staff participated. Students were benefiting from the consistency of using the same strategies in a number of different subject areas:

I think this Literacy Initiative has been hugely powerful in the classroom in the curriculum areas, plus the training, the way the training has been. Yes, it’s a Saturday, but they’re usually so darn valuable you don’t mind giving up a Saturday at all. And you’re paid for that time.

Even though the workshops were held on Saturdays, teachers were paid for their time. They participated in school teams and so they had colleagues to share the experience. This made it easier to come back to the schools and help each other experiment with the new approaches. Although the response to the Literacy Initiative was overwhelmingly positive, it did not meet everyone’s needs. Not all of the National Urban Alliance (NUA) consultants were well-received, so the response depended on the speaker. Opinions also varied depending on the experience level of teachers and their level of expertise in literacy. For teachers with extensive experience, the Literacy Initiative did not stand out:

I’ve been around long enough to have had lots of suitcases of tricks that sit in my closet. And while the literacy strategies are worthwhile, they weren’t particularly more exceptional than the other good workshops I’ve been to. It was certainly in the group of well-done workshops but it wasn’t at

**Teachers agreed that the literacy strategies were permeating schools, especially when a majority of staff participated. Students were benefiting from the consistency of using the same strategies in a number of different subject areas.**

the pinnacle of my experience. So I don’t know why Seattle was so sold on this and why we were all getting paid.

Like all the district’s professional development programs, teachers’ reactions to district-sponsored professional development opportunities were subject-specific. Since all of the major initiatives were grant funded, areas without support from external grants received little or no attention from the district. This was especially true in social studies and math.

In 2003, the district became part of a collaborative grant, designed and administered by the University of Washington, for Developing Mathematical Ideas (DMI) at the elementary level. Participation was voluntary and not widespread. Unlike the Literacy Initiative, which attempted to institute a common set of strategies district-wide, there was no comparable program for math. If schools decided to focus on math, they could “buy back” a DMI facilitator, who could help the school work on a particular topic. According to one teacher consultant, what usually happened was that teachers discovered how poorly prepared they were to teach the topic. Reform mathematics called for a radically different approach and required more in-depth knowledge of math concepts. Consequently, the need for professional development in mathematics was great, but without a large district grant, one math leader acknowledged that the district’s math efforts to date have been more “patches” than programs.

In the last five years, the district had the opportunity to learn about quality professional development from external providers, and when funding was available, the district tried to incorporate the essential components that tend to produce results. In the STAR mentor program (joint effort between the Seattle Teachers Association and the district that focused on supporting new and veteran teachers through mentoring) and Building Leadership Team (BLT) training, the professional development occurred over an extended period of time with colleagues. However, existing resources did not allow the district to extend this quality of support to all areas.

While the district's record for professional development for teachers was improving, support for principal learning was much more mixed. Although the district often brought in prominent national speakers, principals characterized their Leadership Institutes as "all over the map." Principals noted that the training was "top-down" and provided little opportunity to interact with peers. One principal summarized the experience this way:

I have not had an opportunity to provide any input or participate in the planning.... This one coming up happens to have some promise, I think. There have been others in the past which I thought were a major waste of time. If you're asking what they were, I probably wouldn't remember. Mostly because they were pretty much discarded.

## Summary

**T**he structure for communicating policies to Seattle schools significantly influenced the school's response to requirements. The three major policies intended to have a direct or indirect effect on instruction were: standards, the transformation planning process, and professional development. Although the district identified standards as the umbrella shaping everything they do, and despite the increased focus on standards at the state and district levels, teachers received little guidance about what to teach or how to teach it, except in science. The district standards provided only general topics and there was rarely an explicit connection between the standards and the content of professional development initiatives. Even with significant improvement in professional development in recent years, teachers did not have the training to diagnose student needs or to differentiate instruction to ensure that all students would meet the standards. The absence of a coherent curriculum at the middle and high school levels added to the demands and teacher frustration.

The transformation process did provide schools with an opportunity to work on some of these gaps at the school level. Central office provided a number of tools to assist school leaders in transforming their schools. Funding from an external grant bought some crucial resource

support. The response from schools varied considerably, depending on the school's capacity, determined by whether structures were in place and whether the school had a strong community of practice to handle the change process. School leadership was also crucial. Principals tended to mediate the district policy mandates to make sure that this rare opportunity did not go to waste. Skilled principals were able to use existing structures and to motivate teacher leaders to spearhead the effort at the school level. While the district's transformation guidelines focused almost entirely on test scores and only indirectly on instruction, the schools, for the most part, used the process to build an instructional focus.

Two telling observations about the data collected on the transformation process characterized the schools' views of the district's policies. First, overwhelmingly, when schools identified key players in the reform, central office staff were rarely mentioned. Instead, the credit was given to the availability of money, from the Gates Foundation, the Nesholm Family Foundation, the Alliance for Education, or the National Science Foundation. Even more surprising, none of the communications between central office and schools in our database were about instruction.<sup>15</sup> It was only through professional development, which was improving, that schools were learning to focus on teaching.

For the most part, the central office did not recognize the level or kind of support schools needed to implement the transformation process. Generally, the district overestimated individual schools' capacity to make sense of guidelines and their ability to design programs that might lead to improvements in teaching and learning. The central office staff was spread too thin and spent too little time in the schools to assess the needs of individual schools. Further, the district had only limited staff that could help address needs even when they were identified. Savvy principals did find resources to support their work, often from outside the district. Most of the schools that were able to utilize this process to further their own school goals had the support of external partners in terms of both money and intellectual input from coaches and facilitators. Schools without existing structures already in place really struggled with the transformation process and the district tools did not help. Recognition of the gap between the needs and the supports led one district administrator to conclude, "We are not as wise and informed by school knowledge as seems prudent in our central office transformation."

Without adequate professional development and the resources, especially expertise, to address instructional needs, the schools saw the district's demands for accountability as an unfunded mandate.

The experience in Seattle Public Schools is consistent with previous research that has demonstrated that policies cannot mandate what or how much teachers learn (McLaughlin, 1987). They can, however, provide incentives and supports for teachers to work together in communities of practice. For example, when a critical mass of teachers from one school participated in the Literacy Initiative, they were able to rely on each other to support their experimentation with new practices. District policies can also focus attention and resources (time and money) on activities that engage teachers in collaborative communities. In some schools with existing structures and strong leadership, the transformation process was able to stimulate professional discourse because staff had the opportunity to make meaning for themselves.

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## Seattle Appendix A: 2002 WASL Achievement Data

Target District Standard is 80 Percent Meeting Standard on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL)

### Seattle Public Schools 2002 WASL Data Percent Meeting Standards

Subject	HS Grade 10	MS Grade 7	Elementary Grade 4
Math	35	30	51
Reading	52	31	64
Writing	47	44	51
Listening	75	77	64

### Seattle Public Schools Achievement Gap 2002 WASL Data Percent Meeting Standards 10th Grade

Subject	Native American	Asian	African American	Latino	White
Math	32	38	8	20	54
Reading	55	55	23	42	71
Writing	43	50	23	33	64
Listening	73	80	59	65	87

**Seattle Public Schools  
Achievement Gap 2002 WASL Data  
Percent Meeting Standards  
7th Grade**

Subject	Native American	Asian	African American	Latino	White
Math	32	38	8	20	54
Reading	55	55	23	42	71
Writing	32	54	32	40	62
Listening	70	75	66	66	88

**Seattle Public Schools  
Achievement Gap 2002 WASL Data  
Percent Meeting Standards  
4th Grade**

Subject	Native American	Asian	African American	Latino	White
Math	38	57	22	38	70
Reading	55	67	43	51	81
Writing	30	59	32	40	63
Listening	67	66	49	58	76

## Seattle Appendix B: District Professional Development Initiatives

### The Literacy Initiative

As the first district-wide K-12 initiative in anyone's memory, the Literacy Initiative represented a level of commitment to instruction and professional development that was new for Seattle. At the conclusion of our data collection, the Literacy Initiative was in its third year. The district contracted with the National Urban Alliance (NUA) to provide 72 hours of training for each teacher through a two-year program that consisted of five Saturday classes spaced throughout each year. There was also limited support from consultants at the school level (four or five days per year). The training consisted of 25 literacy strategies to enhance reading and writing skills. For the most part, the strategies were simple, high-success tools that helped students think about what they read and write. Teams of teachers from schools participated together so they could support each other in implementing the strategies learned. The goal was to train every teacher in the district within five years.

### Elementary Science

The other major district-wide initiative, which began in 1997, was a National Science Foundation (NSF) elementary science initiative. The five-year grant was jointly funded by NSF and the district, supported by the Seattle Education Association (SEA), and led by the University of Washington. The focus was to provide K-5 teachers opportunities to learn about teaching inquiry-based science. Teachers strengthened their science background through courses at the UW, work with consultants, and site-based work with other teachers. Although the stipend for teachers' time was minimal, this initiative was considered the standard bearer for quality professional development. University experts designed the program, which included in-depth study of content, modeling, and opportunities to experience as well as practice inquiry-based science. Also, there was ongoing support for teachers as they tried to implement what they had learned back in their classrooms.

### Mathematics

Another highly regarded professional development opportunity was a National Science Foundation Mathematics grant, again, designed and led by the University of Washington. In two-year cycles, the project provided professional development for teachers at different levels. First, the focus was on elementary teachers, then middle school teachers, and finally, the next two years shifted to high school. The focus was on leadership training and constructivist math pedagogy. Teachers participated in classes and worked together to look at student work. This was part of a six-district collaborative grant administered by the University of Washington. Although those who participated had high praise for the university program, participation by Seattle teachers was voluntary and therefore, the training reached only a small percentage of math teachers.

### New Teacher Academy and STAR Mentor Program

Like most diverse urban districts, Seattle has had a difficult time keeping new teachers. They were losing up to 40 percent of their teachers in their first five years of teaching, many of them in their first three. As a result, a joint effort between the teachers' association and the district

focused on supporting new teachers through the STAR mentor program (as well as veteran teachers who sought support or were referred to the program). Each year the program has evolved. Beginning in 2000, the district launched the New Teacher Academy with a one-day orientation for new teachers. The program has now expanded to three days, with periodic follow-up sessions throughout the school year. All new teachers are assigned a STAR mentor. Mentors are also assigned to veteran teachers who seek assistance or who are referred to the program. STAR mentors are teachers on full-time special assignment who provide in-class support to new teachers. All mentors have been trained to use the Professional Practice Standards as a guide in assisting teachers. Funding for this program comes from the state TAP (Teacher Assistance Program). In Seattle, there are a total of 12 STAR mentors, resulting in a caseload of about 18 new teachers per mentor. As a result, the mentors are severely taxed.

### Teacher Consultants

The district provided support to schools through teacher consultants for standards support, literacy, and elementary science and mathematics. There were three elementary, one middle school, and one high school standards support consultants to work with teachers and schools in implementing the district's standards.

Similarly, there were three elementary, one middle school literacy consultant, and a few consultants funded by the National Science Foundation grant for elementary science and math. Consultants' work varied; sometimes they worked with individual teachers, sometimes teacher teams, or whole schools.

### Summer Institute

The biggest professional development event of the year was the Summer Institute, which was a week-long smorgasbord of two- to three-hour classes. The 2001 Institute made an effort to be more focused in the offerings than in the past, with courses organized under four main headings: "Getting to Standards and Beyond," "Closing the Gap—Diversity," "Literacy," and a catch-all category of "Expanding Repertoire," which included everything from math curriculum, full-day kindergarten, website development, Student Groups, to Socratic Seminars. The sessions tended to be introductory in nature. The majority of teachers in attendance were relatively new teachers, and most were from elementary schools. While the Institute was free to all Seattle Public Schools staff, teachers were not paid for their time.

### Building Leadership Training

Beginning in the spring of 2001, Building Leadership Teams attended workshops to learn such skills as facilitation and decision-making strategies. This initiative was funded by an external grant but collaboratively endorsed by the district and the union, and was designed and conducted by external consultants. Although the training had no direct focus on instruction, the goal was to provide training to support schools in the transformation process so that schools could focus on improving teaching and learning. The training was mandatory, but only a small number of schools could be trained at one time, so schools participated in different cycles.

### Principal Leadership Institutes

Professional development for school leaders was conducted through four full-day institutes throughout the year. Topics varied from diversity to guidelines for the transformation process to teacher evaluations. The relationship to instruction was often indirect, and principals had no input into the focus of these professional development days. Funding for these institutes was provided by the Alliance for Education.

## Seattle Appendix C: District Reform Highlights

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- 1978 The Seattle Plan for desegregating the schools implemented in the fall.
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- 1989 Cresip Report issued charging that the Seattle School Board was dysfunctional and the administration of the district was poor.
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- 1992 The superintendent, with strong support from the executive director of SEA, initiated district reforms including restructuring central office and moving toward site-based management including increasing the funds allocated to each school and allowing decisions about the use of funds to be made by principals and school staff.
- District/SEA contract set parameters for, and was a precursor to, many decentralization efforts over the next 10 years.
- 
- 1993 Washington State passed a sweeping education reform law calling for rigorous academic standards, assessments, and accountability measures.
- 
- 1994 A joint team of representatives from the business community, community activists, the mayors office, the SEA, and the district created scenarios for the future of public education in Seattle for the year 2000.
- 
- 1995 John Stanford became superintendent, changed how the district functioned, gave new authority to principals, and brought in private funds.
- Seattle Alliance for Education joined the Fund for Excellence and Partners in Public Education to become the Alliance for Education. The Alliance created the Principal Leadership Institute to support principals.
- 
- 1997 The Trust Agreement created between the Seattle School Board and the Seattle Education Association, a radical departure from traditional teacher contracts, ended seniority in teacher assignments and gave teachers significant involvement in decisions over budgeting, hiring, and curriculum development.
- 
- 1998 Supt. John Stanford passed away and Chief Financial Officer, Joseph Olchefske, became superintendent.
- The district adopted the Performance Agenda that created a tight-loose management model where the district was purportedly clear on the outcomes but loose on how schools got there.
- Seattle publicly declared a “standards-based district.”
- Weighted Student Formula implemented in 1997-98 school year. Principals and teachers gained increased flexibility over budget, staff, and programs.
- 
- 1999 The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation provided a five-year, \$26 million grant, which supported the Transformation Initiative.
- 
- 2002 Financial crisis announced publicly. \$34 million overspent from 2001-02 and 2002-03 budgets.
- 
- 2003 Superintendent Olschefske resigned and Raj Manhaus hired.
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## A Delicate Balance: District Policies and Classroom 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 frame-

work. 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.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> These plans spelled out each school's strategies for reaching district goals
- <sup>2</sup> 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.
- <sup>3</sup> It should be noted that professional development in the three cities had started to be reorganized towards the end of our study.
- <sup>4</sup> Learning coordinators were certified middle school teachers who were released from some or all classroom responsibilities to support and coordinate instruction in the school. They played an important role facilitating communication between teachers and administrators at the school and district level. The teachers who performed this function at the elementary school level were called implementers. While most schools in this study had a coordinator, implementer, or both, depending on grade levels served in the school, most MPS schools did not.
- <sup>5</sup> *Milwaukee Public Schools K-12 Academic Standards and Grade Level Expectations*. (November 1998). p. MA-10, MA-11.
- <sup>6</sup> Background information on MPS proficiencies is taken from a 2001 report of an in-depth study of the initiative. See Clune, W. H., Mason, S., Pohs, C., Thiel, C., & White, P. (April 2, 2002) *The Milwaukee Middle School Proficiencies: Systemic School Reform Through High-Stakes Assessments and a Network of Schools*. Madison, WI: Center for the Study of Systemic Reform in Milwaukee Public Schools, Wisconsin Center for Education Research.
- <sup>7</sup> Historical note: At the conclusion of this institute, the MPS superintendent, who had been in office during the entirety of our study, announced his resignation.
- <sup>8</sup> Between 1977 and 1995, the number of white students dropped from 65 percent of overall enrollment to 40 percent, and those proportions have remained fairly constant since.
- <sup>9</sup> The Peter Principle, defined by the American Heritage Dictionary, Fourth Edition (2000), as the theory that employees will advance to their highest level of competence and then be promoted to and remain at a level at which they are incompetent.
- <sup>10</sup> Cresip is part of a Washington DC-based consulting firm.
- <sup>11</sup> Ouchi, W., Cooper, B., Segal, L, DeRoche, T., Brown, C., and Galvin, E. (2002). *The organization of primary and secondary school systems*. (Unpublished manuscript). This study found that Seattle remained more top-heavy than most districts, especially site-based districts.
- <sup>12</sup> A reorganization after the completion of our data collection has brought all professional development under one department.
- <sup>13</sup> ATLAS Communities is a comprehensive school improvement initiative designed to help create high performing schools that serve all students well ([www.atlascommunities.org](http://www.atlascommunities.org)).
- <sup>14</sup> Nesholm Family Foundation provided grants supporting three high poverty middle schools.
- <sup>15</sup> This code in our database contained no entries.

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