

Districts as Change Agents: Levers for System-Wide Instructional Improvement

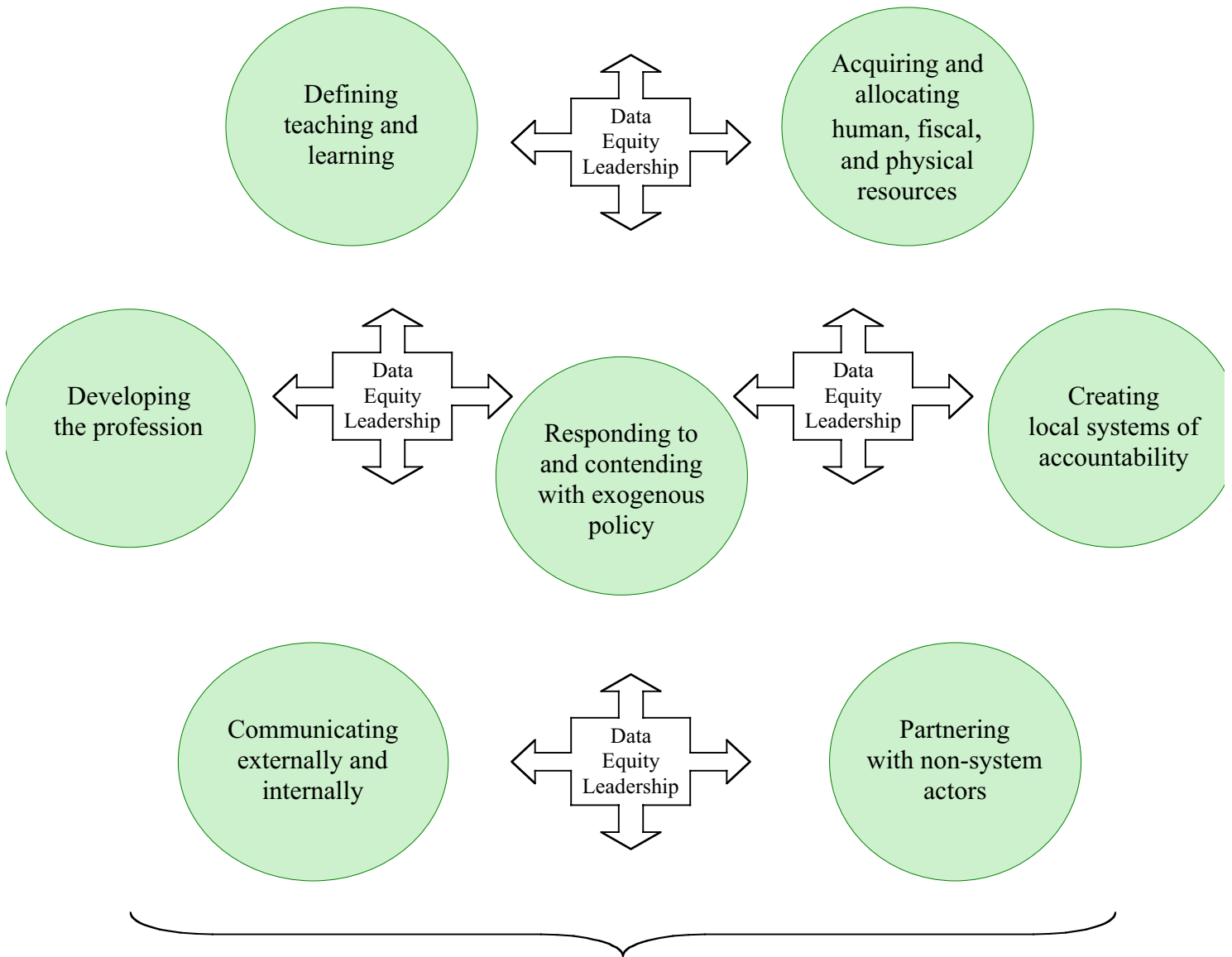
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The logo for the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy (ctp) features the lowercase letters 'ctp' in white, centered within a dark teal square. This square is partially overlapped by a larger, lighter teal square behind it, creating a layered effect.

Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy

Domains of District Action



Quality: Coherence, Professionalism/ Learning Community, System-wide Equity, Sustainability

San Diego City Schools:
Theory of Instruction Drives District's Decisionmaking and Infrastructure
Amy M. Hightower, Ph.D., Stanford University

Context: K-12 California district, ~180 schools, ~145,000 students

District defines **teaching and learning** through research-based theory of instruction; has three key assumptions:

1. Learning depends on quality teaching, and quality teaching is enabled by structures/opportunities established by larger district system.
2. Explicit equity considerations, low performer focus ensure equally-high learning opportunities.
3. Literacy and mathematics are gate-keeping skills from which all learning proceeds.

Professional development is San Diego's most pivotal mechanism for instilling theory of instruction across the district's system of schools, including:

- Continuous, rigorous professional development for principals in groups led by trained central office Instructional Leaders.
- For teachers: principals lead school-based professional development activities; national experts teach workshops and teachers are paid to attend them; summer school classes co-taught with trained coaches; model demonstration classes with expert teachers. Most classes focus on pedagogy of teaching literacy and mathematics.
- Network of trained, certified site-based peer coaches work in classrooms on teachers' practice.

Theory of instruction helps district **manage exogenous policy** and **acquire/allocate resources**:

- SDCS leaders use state policy to legitimate and deepen local reform (e.g., state's accountability push helps district target and channel funds to low-performing schools and students).
- With instructional priorities defined, district leaders have redirected resources to fit these priorities (e.g., various state resources help fund peer coach network).
- New foundation dollars have been attracted to district by strength of instructional theory.

Local accountability systems help district monitor its huge investments in theory of instruction:

- SDCS tracks progress on SAT-9 state test to measure achievement by quartiles, with particular attention to lowest performing students and schools.
- SDCS has developed intervention strategies and a set of diagnostic assessments for placement into extended literacy and mathematics support classes with reduced class sizes and specially trained instructors.
- Budding electronic system helps principals track students according to multiple measures.

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Lack of communications infrastructure politicizes reform and challenges its sustainability:

- Theory of change favors speed of implementation/reform fidelity over engagement/buy-in.
- Teachers, especially, feel left out of the reform's design; the few communications efforts have left teachers believing they are to sign onto a "done deal."
- Misinformation has led some parents to question reform (e.g., GATE/AP parents, Title I parents, ELL parents).
- Schism on school board results in continuous 3-to-2 split on most district policies. Split marginally favors district reform, but beneath any major policy decision in the district is reality that upcoming board election could unseat current district leaders and topple fiscal and professional development support network that holds instructional theory in place.

Implications:

- Reform coheres around theory of instruction.
- Bitter disagreements in district over notions of "professionalism" and "professional autonomy."
- Bottom line: Reform is instructionally sound but politically unstable.

Pine River School District:
Using State Policy and a Community Partnership to Fortify Local Goals
Sarah Gilbert, Stanford University

Context: K-12 district, with over 100,000 students in over 100 schools

Pine River **contends with its state environment** by absorbing and expanding on policies to strengthen its own commitment to high student achievement.

- By following the state's curriculum and adopting existing state assessments as its own yardstick for quality, the district promotes coherence among the demands placed on schools.
- The culture of the district includes a desire to exceed state requirements by implementing policies earlier and more rigorously than required.

Pine River has based its **local system of accountability** on state measures.

- The Goal for Student Achievement states that nearly all students in gateway grades will pass the state end-of-year assessments.
- The district provides additional instruction time for students who are not on track to pass the assessments, and it has introduced its own assessment measures in the early grades to focus attention on literacy and math.
- Even though the district is not likely to meet this goal by its self-imposed deadline, commitment to it remains high among district staff members and teachers.

Partnering with a community organization helped Pine River develop its Goal for Student Achievement and continues to act as a critical friend in informing and supporting district decisions.

- A coalition of businesses and community leaders supports the district by building consensus about education goals and priorities within the district and in the community.
- The coalition provides grants to teachers, funds a leadership development program, and promotes teacher leadership.
- The coalition also pushes the district to follow through on its recommendations.

Through strategic **resource allocation** and **professional development**, Pine River supports schools' plans to meet the Goal of Student Achievement.

- The state and district agree that schools can and should make instructional decisions; Pine River schools create their own improvement plans.
- Principals have some flexibility in using their school budget to support their own visions of good teaching and learning.
- The district controls about a quarter of professional development funds, used mainly for training on district-wide assessments. School leaders control the remainder and arrange with central office specialists the kind of opportunities that would benefit their own staffs the most. This system, while generally popular with teachers, is fragmented and under the auspices of several different departments.

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Pine River has not defined a district-wide vision of **teaching and learning**.

- However, early-grade assessments have sparked an understanding of literacy and mathematics instruction in elementary schools.
- Administrators are confident that good teaching happens because test scores are generally high.
- School-level leadership becomes important for thinking about and promoting quality in terms other than test scores.

Implications:

- State and local accountability measures and goals convey coherent expectations about achievement to schools and teachers, but undefined conceptions of quality teaching and learning and disjointed professional development lead to school-centered, not district-wide, conceptions of quality teaching and learning.
- Pine River's generally high level of overall achievement masks inequities among student groups and among schools. It is possible that stubborn achievement gaps will not shrink without new interventions.
- Long-standing parent, teacher, administrator, and community support for excellence means that commitment to high achievement on tests is likely to continue.

Birchwood School District:
When Standards-Based Reform Hits a Decentralized, Resource-Strapped System
Jennifer L. Husbands, Stanford University

Context: K-12 district, ~ 15,000 students, ~25 schools

While some schools and curricular areas evidence a theory of instruction, the district lacks a system-wide **definition of teaching and learning** or a coordinated push toward improving instruction

- ESL, Science, and elementary literacy provide some positive examples, but they are driven by a few individuals who tend to operate independently, not as part of an overall strategy
- District leaders appear focused on political and legal “hot buttons” rather than the improvement of teaching and learning; they seem distracted by the many local “fires” to which they must attend
- Our Birchwood school sample focuses on high schools; there may be some difference across levels in the district’s focus on teaching and learning (greater at the elementary level, less at the secondary level)

In a **resource**-strapped context and without strong leadership throughout the system, this lack of guiding focus leaves the district without strategic direction for the **allocation** of limited funds toward the improvement of teaching and learning

- The district faces severe facilities issues that encroach upon general and reserve funds
- The local community has not passed a construction bond since the mid 1980’s; indeed, there is organized opposition *against* bond and maintenance/operations levy passage
- Teacher pay in Birchwood is lower than in neighboring districts at several points on the salary schedule; coupled with facilities issues, this makes it a less attractive place to work, and teacher and administrator turnover is quite high

Given a lack of a guiding definition of teaching and learning, and despite the resource picture, Birchwood has taken cues from **state policy** and implemented more assessments than are required by the state

- Beyond state-required criterion and norm-referenced assessments, Birchwood has chosen to pay for additional norm-referenced testing in other grades; they have also developed and administered diagnostic assessments in literacy and math, intended to predict performance on the state’s criterion-referenced assessments
- The additional testing represents a significant financial investment for the district
- Teachers express enormous frustration with the extensive testing schedule

In an attempt to focus the district and **engage constituents beyond the formal boundaries of the system**, Birchwood undertook strategic planning in the late 1990s

- However, the plan has little purchase beyond the school board and district office, and the involvement of multiple stakeholders during the preparation of the plan does not appear to have carried through to its implementation

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Implications:

- Pockets of good practice mean that learning opportunities for adults and students are somewhat randomly distributed, raising equity concerns
- System-wide, professional community is weak though, again, there are pockets of collaboration and collegiality that exist in spite of, not because of, district action
- Legacy of site-based management challenges district leaders' attempts to implement standards-based reform as handed down from the state

Broadening Boundaries to Build System Capacity: The Highland School District
Julie A. Marsh, Stanford University

Context: K-8 district in Northern California Bay Area: ~ 8,000 students, 13 schools

Driving Force: Broadening Boundaries and Forging Partnerships

- “Nonsystem” actors and partnerships provide expertise, knowledge, and physical and human resources that help achieve ambitious reform districtwide
- Strategic planning builds shared understanding of district goals and reform strategies; garners intellectual capital; builds ownership; provides direction and aligns other functional domains; generates learning among participants; provides stability in reform vision in face of turnover
- University-district collaborative envisions seamless, inquiry-based professional development for teachers from preparation to induction to mastery; helps “train our own”; generates learning and “cross-pollination” from partner district and university; helps rethink roles within central office; provides human and social capital
- Other partnerships build capacity to pursue goals, particularly in area of literacy, assessment, and inquiry-based practice

Broadening and Partnering Guide and Align Efforts in Other Domains of District Action

1. *Communication*—strategic planning and collaboration facilitate internal and external communication, common goals and beliefs, and sense of ownership (although there is room for improvement)
2. *Defining teaching and learning*—partnerships build common conception of what good teaching looks like and what it means to be a professional, including notions that data and reflection inform practice, learning is best assessed with multiple measures, teaching should align with “best practices” defined by standards and research
3. *Developing the profession*—university-district collaborative aligns support at all stages of teaching career; district also provides site-based literacy support and principal professional development
4. *Acquiring and allocating resources*—planning goals and strategies guide budget and resource decisions, spur annual re-evaluation of programs and enterprising approaches to generate funds and free up resources to support goals
5. *Contending with exogenous policies*—willingness to adapt or ignore external policies and rules, and forgo grants, when necessary to advance district goals and strategies
6. *Creating local systems of accountability*—data-driven system at all levels relies on multiple indicators of progress and recognition of progress

Implications

- Broadening and partnering contributes to coherence of policies and programs; protects district from upheaval during leadership turnover
- Distributed leadership is an important facilitating condition
- Sustainability challenges are particularly relevant to partnerships, where there is a need for constant renewal when new actors or partner organizations join
- Equity issues addressed primarily at school-level

Using Data: Implications of District Domains of Action
Viki M. Young, Stanford University

A framework that highlights district domains of action expands the definition of data.

- Data undergird activities within each domain.
- The framework poses the question: What kinds of data inform the problems and progress of the activities within each domain?
- The use of data serves to link the domains together as a test of internal consistency.

San Diego City Schools exemplifies how **defining teaching and learning** guides choices about data that directly inform the development and practice of their theory of instruction.

- Their definition of quality teaching and learning demands data about instruction.
- Diagnostic tests, classroom observations, and videos of principals leading staff conferences are analyzed by teachers, peer coaches, principals, and district instructional leaders to understand how practice reflects the vision of quality.

Strategic **partnering with non-system actors** builds common understandings of the data that matter and their meaning, and builds capacity to use data, as illustrated in Highland and Pine River.

- Strategic planning in Highland and the coalition of business and community leaders in Pine River incorporate collaborative inquiry processes, making data analysis an explicit step in setting strategic goals.
- An university-district collaborative in Highland helps develop the district's use of teacher inquiry in their own professional development.

Developing a local system of accountability promotes the goals of highest priority to the district, and explicitly specifies data that measure progress towards those goals.

- Pine River leverages state assessments to promote an ambitious goal: nearly all students in gateway grades will pass the state end-of-year assessments.
- San Diego holds principals accountable for the instructional practices in their schools and the learning of their teachers, implying the need for data about classroom instruction and staff conferences.
- Highland values the professionalism of its teachers and commissions surveys of teachers' satisfaction and needs.
- Birchwood instituted additional assessments in an effort to predict performance on the state assessments, but the extensive data this yields is little used to inform broader strategies for instructional change.

A cross-case analysis of the domains of district action and their implications for data, as enacted by the districts, yield several emerging themes.

- A focus on the multiple domains of district action expands the definition of data relevant to improving the quality and equity of student outcomes.
- An expanded definition of data signals where districts must develop the capacity to use data.
- Developing capacity to use data throughout the district system can be professionalizing.
- Capacity issues imply that more data is not necessarily better.
- The question of how data are used to support domains of district activity serves as a cross-cutting test of internal consistency.