

# Reforming Districts: How Districts Support School Reform

---

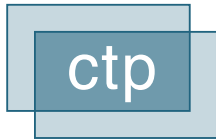
A Research Report

by  
**Milbrey McLaughlin**  
**Joan Talbert**  
Stanford University

**September 2003**  
*(Document R-03-6)*



**Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy**  
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON



## Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy

### A National Research Consortium

---

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON (lead institution)

STANFORD UNIVERSITY

TEACHERS COLLEGE/COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Other active participants in CTP's research and dissemination program include researchers affiliated with Indiana University, Michigan State University, Pennsylvania State University, the University of California at Santa Barbara, the University of North Carolina, and Education Matters, Inc.

CTP studies the way policies and conditions in schools, districts, states, and teacher education institutions shape the quality of teaching and learning in the nation's elementary and secondary schools. The Center pays particular attention to the ways these policies and conditions interact with each other to influence the teaching profession and its practice.

The Center's program of research is carried out in collaboration with various other research organizations, among them other OERI-funded research centers, including the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE), the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE), and the Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA). The Center is affiliated with a variety of professional and advocacy organizations that represent teachers, teacher educators, state and local policymakers, disciplinary groups, and educational reform interests.

---

The work reported herein was supported under the Educational Research and Development Centers Program, PR/Award Number R308B970003, as administered by the National Institute on Educational Governance, Finance, Policymaking and Management, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of either national institute, OERI, or the U.S. Department of Education, or the endorsement of the federal government.

This paper is a revised and extended version of a chapter published in Hightower, A., Knapp, M., Marsh, J., & McLaughlin, M. (Eds.) *School Districts and Instructional Renewal*, New York: Teachers College Press, 2002 (pp 173-192). It reflects the work of our Center team, most especially that of Amy Hightower and Julie Marsh, whose case analyses figure prominently here. We are grateful to Anthony Bryk and Michael Fullan for their candid and helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

# CONTENTS

<u>Abstract</u> .....	3
<u>Introduction</u> .....	5
<u>Does the District Matter for School Reform</u> .....	6
<u>What Does A Reforming District Do?</u> .....	10
Taking the System as Unit of Change .....	10
System Communication and Shared Reform Commitment .....	11
Strategic Planning at the System Level .....	12
Learning to Support School Reform Across the System .....	13
Establishing a Coherent Focus on Teaching and Learning .....	15
Providing Instructional Support that is Responsive to School Needs .....	16
Engendering Data-Based Inquiry and Accountability .....	18
<u>Revisiting Conventional Wisdom about District Reform</u> .....	20
Myth 1: Teachers and Schools Resist a Strong Central Office Role .....	20
Myth 2: Turnover and Change Will Sink Reform Efforts .....	22
Myth 3: Local Politics Will Defeat a Serious Reform Agenda .....	23
<u>Conclusion</u> .....	25
<u>Endnotes</u> .....	26
<u>References</u> .....	27
<u>Appendices</u> .....	30



---

## ABSTRACT

School districts have participated in multiple rounds of education reform activity in the past few decades, yet few have made headway on system-wide school improvement. This paper addresses the questions of whether districts matter for school reform progress and what successful “reforming” districts do to achieve system change and to navigate the pitfalls associated with system change efforts. Using multi-level survey data and four-year case studies of three reforming California districts, the paper offers new evidence of district effects on school reform progress and improved student outcomes and develops a picture of a reforming district.

The reforming districts featured in this analysis offer instructive exception to conventional wisdom—or myths—about district reform. One myth predicts that teachers and principals will resist a strong district role. Yet, our research provides evidence that a weak central office in fact limits schools’ reform progress, while a strong district role is effective and welcomed when it uses a strategic conception of responsibilities and leadership between system levels. A second myth about district reform holds that turnover or personnel “churn” will derail efforts to establish and sustain a consistent reform agenda. While this statement is true in many instances, in two districts studied, turnover in top leadership positions did not trigger significant change in district priorities or norms because planning processes and inclusive communication strategies over time had embedded them in district culture. A third myth asserts that local politics will defeat a serious reform agenda; yet, leaders in each reforming district articulated unambiguous goals and priorities and, with strong board support developed over many years, were able to navigate local political waters and protect a strong district role.

Each of the reforming districts studied was a self-conscious “learning organization,” investing in system-wide learning—in the central office, in schools, in cross-school teacher networks, and in units such as the business office that typically are excluded from professional development focused on instruction. This research suggests that taking the district system as the “unit of change” is essential to advancing equitable and sustainable reform.



---

## INTRODUCTION

School districts have participated in multiple rounds of education reform activity in the past few decades. They have been partners to and observers of federal, state, local, and private efforts to restructure the school day, hold students and teachers accountable to more rigorous standards, install new curricula and instructional practices, provide more and better professional development for teachers, decentralize district functions, and more. They have invented their own reform agenda and strategies. Armies of analysts agree however that, especially in urban districts, this hyperactive reform agenda has not added up to much. And even when success could be claimed, it was often ephemeral, localized, and near impossible to “scale up.” (See for example: Bodilly, 1998, Cuban, 1990; Elmore, 1996; Fullan, 2001; Hess, 1999; Hill, 1995; Ladd, 1996; Sarason, 1996; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Districts’ dismal track record in carrying out or sustaining school reform leads some policymakers and reformers to conclude that while the district is part of the reform problem it should not be part of the solution. Major school reform initiatives such as the Coalition of Essential Schools, the Annenberg Challenge, and Goals 2000 cut districts out of the action in the view that central office incompetence was incurable and that school reforms were bound to fail at the district door. Anthony Bryk and his colleagues, for instance, detailed Chicago’s massive system failure, showing how corruption and ineptitude at the district level—forms not processed, books not ordered, pay checks not cut—stymied reform at the school level (Bryk, et al., 1998). John Chubb and Terry Moe (1990) claimed that large urban districts are incapable of supporting school reform because their “difficult students, unsupportive parents,” size, and heterogeneous populations (p. 168ff) create political dynamics that inevitably lead to excessive, dysfunctional bureaucratic control. While Chubb and Moe would dismantle local education systems and replace democratic control of education with market control, others would maintain local school systems but radically decentralize district authority.

We offer a different response to these poor reviews of district competence and capacity to support school reform. We join a growing number of researchers and analysts who conclude that, for better or worse, districts matter fundamentally to what goes on in schools and classrooms and that without effective district engagement, school- by-school reform efforts are bound to disappoint.

Several studies document the key role that districts play in mediating state standards for instruction and their potential to lead district-wide school improvement (Elmore & Burney, 1998, 1999; Massell & Goertz, 1999; Spillane & Thompson, 1997; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). These studies spotlight the district policy system and show the district to be a significant agent in promoting, or inhibiting, the improvement of teaching and learning in American schools. They show that some districts do quite well in supporting their schools’ reform and suggest that district reform is essential to successful, sustained school reform. Further, the equity agenda for school reform sits squarely on the district’s plate. Just about everything a district does could be assumed by another agent or agency—except monitoring and managing equity of student resources and outcomes across schools (House, 2000; Lewis, 1995). We view the challenge of reforming districts as a difficult but necessary one.

This paper offers new evidence of district effects on school reform progress and improved student outcomes and develops a picture of a reforming district. We address three questions: Does the district matter for school reform? What does a reforming district do? And, how do reforming districts navigate the pitfalls associated with efforts to foster meaningful system change?

---

We draw upon multi-level, multi-method data developed over four years of research on California school districts in the San Francisco Bay Area and San Diego City Schools. Quantitative data come from surveys of teachers, principals, and district administrators in the Bay Area. To address the question of district effects on school reform, we use longitudinal survey data for schools that participated in the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) during 1997-2001, examining the effect of district culture and reform support on school organization outcomes promoted by the reform. Teacher surveys conducted in 1998 and in 2001 using the same measures of district and school conditions yielded longitudinal data for 18 BASRC schools in 15 districts. In addressing the question of what reforming districts do, we use findings on patterns of district action from a district administrator survey representing 58 of the Bay Area's 118 school districts. Longitudinal SAT-9 test data from the California Department of Education provide measures of student academic outcomes.

Qualitative data come from four-year case studies of three reforming districts—two Bay Area districts distinguished by their strong reform record and San Diego City School District, known for its intensive reform work under the leadership of Alan Bersin and Anthony Alvarado. The Bay Area districts—pseudonymed Highland and East Bay Unified School District—are middle-sized California districts of 10-12 schools, while San Diego City School District is the second largest district in the state with over 160 schools.<sup>1</sup> All three districts have the highly diverse student populations typical of California school districts at the turn of the century. At the time of our study, two-thirds of San Diego's students were eligible for free meals, and nearly a third were English learners; over one third of Highland students qualified for free meals, and a fourth were English learners; and one fifth of East Bay Unified's student were eligible for free meals and 15% were English learners. Compared to other California districts, San Diego City School District serves a poorer, more race/ethnically diverse student population; student demographics of the two middle-sized California districts are typical of the Bay Area, though Highland's students are significantly poorer than average for the region's districts (see Appendix D for statistics).

Dialogue between survey research in Bay Area schools and districts and case studies of districts selected for their reform orientation make it possible to identify patterns of district action that support school reform progress and to examine these practices over time. This paper highlights results of our iterative quantitative and qualitative analysis. San Diego City Schools is a strategic case in the study, given the importance that some analysts have placed on district poverty and size in arguments about the organizational dysfunctions and political economy of urban school districts.<sup>2</sup> Since the three case study districts share a state policy context, differences in their experiences as reforming districts can be attributed to their different local context and reform practices. We highlight commonalities in principles for reform action across the districts, as well as differences in their local context challenges.

## **DOES THE DISTRICT MATTER FOR SCHOOL REFORM?**

Prior research demonstrates a connection between district office actions and school responses. In their analysis of system policies and practices in New York City District 2, for example, Richard Elmore and Deanna Burney (1997) show that district professional development strategies and instructional focus shape what teachers and principals do in schools and ultimately affect student outcomes. James Spillane details how district administrators' interpretations of instructional policy and reform initiatives affect the ways in which principals and teachers understand them (Spillane, 1994; 1998; 2000). Less systematic information exists, though, on whether districts influence their schools' ability to progress on whole school reform and to develop

---

capacity for continuous improvement. The experiences of reforming BASRC schools provide special opportunity to investigate this issue.

Schools that joined the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative in 1997-98 shared a commitment to school reform based in data-based inquiry but came from widely diverse districts in the region—including large high-poverty districts such as Oakland and San Francisco and mid-size districts that span the gamut of community wealth and demographics. Beyond size and demographics, the districts varied in their organizational cultures and in the extent to which the central office supported school reform of the sort BASRC promoted. While the district superintendent responsible for each BASRC school officially endorsed participation in the Collaborative and agreed to waive policies that interfered with the school's reform work, the initiative did not require central office involvement.<sup>3</sup> As a result, BASRC schools experienced a wide range of district response—from having resources pulled and being defined as marginal to the system to receiving pro-active staff support and being positioned as leading schools in the system.

BASRC's mission was to develop schools' capacity to improve education for all students and especially to close achievement gaps between student groups through data-based inquiry. Schools participating in the Collaborative from 1997-2001 worked to develop teachers' ability to examine data on student achievement in order to evaluate their instruction, to establish school norms of collective problem solving, and to build teacher communities throughout the school that learn to improve their practice.

Researchers from diverse perspectives document the importance of these school organization conditions to improvements at school and classroom levels. Prior research shows that the strength of teacher community in a school, and faculty engagement in data-based inquiry, predict student learning gains (Newmann, 1996; CRC, 2002). Moreover, the organizational outcomes that BASRC seeks—data-based inquiry, teacher community, and collective problem solving—represent organizational practices associated with continuous improvement and increased productivity in private business sectors (e.g., Senge, 1990; Spear & Bowen, 1999).

Without an "inquiry stance," and without various forms of student data, teachers are unable to make connections between what they do in the classroom and student outcomes. Without evidence about school-level patterns of performance, teachers and administrators cannot consider such fundamental issues as curriculum choice, resource allocation, and strategies for change (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Hargreaves & Fullan 1998; McDonald, et al., 1999; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Timely and reliable data on student learning outcomes and capacity to use the data for self-assessment are key to school reform, yet teachers typically have little expertise or occasion to engage in data-based discussion that link their practice to student outcomes.

The character and strength of teachers' professional community within the school also emerges as a significant factor in most all accounts of educational improvement. The kind of professional community that we refer to as "teacher learning community" is characterized by shared commitment to improving success with all students and by knowledge-sharing and collaboration to continually improve the quality of their instruction. The norm of collective problem solving that motivates and sustains these communities can develop through inquiry in school-based teacher communities and grounds teachers' shared accountability for improving student outcomes (for example: McDonald, et al., 1999; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993, 2001; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Rosenholtz, 1989; Sergiovanni, 1994; Wagner 2000).

A school's ability to respond to state and federal accountability pressure to improve student test scores and narrow achievement gaps hinges on these conditions of teachers' professional culture. However, teachers' skills in using data on student performance to assess their instruction and collaborating to improve teaching and

---

learning rarely have been the focus of district professional development or policies designed to improve student test scores. Indeed, district responses to accountability pressures sometimes work to limit professional judgment and responsibility for instructional decisions and thus to undermine the development of school-based accountability and learning community. The professional cultures that BASRC promotes and that its reforming schools work to achieve are thus sometimes quite out of sync with district routines and approaches to education improvement.

In order to assess district effects on schools' reform progress, we developed survey measures of key facets of school culture promoted by BASRC—data-based inquiry, teacher learning community, and collective problem solving—as well as global measures of district culture. Teachers in a sample of 18 BASRC schools were asked in 1998 and again in 2001 to rate these facets of their school culture and also to rate their district on its general support of teacher professionalism and support of school reform goals. (See Appendix A for survey measures of these school and district variables.)

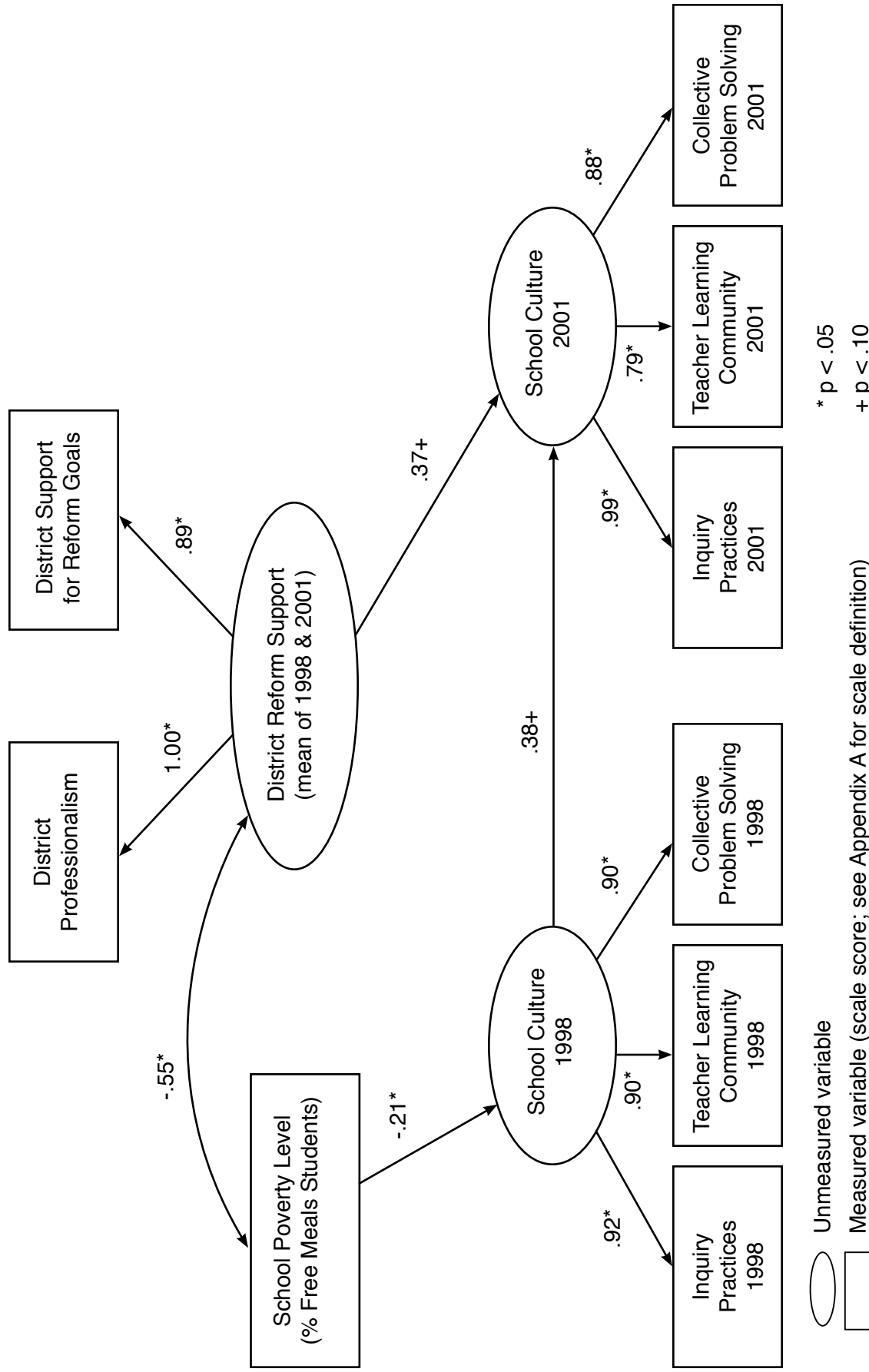
The measure of "*District Professionalism*" used in this analysis taps teachers' views of district priorities to support high quality teaching and learning; commitment to student learning as "bottom line," high expectations for schools, and professional development necessary to reach high standards for every student. Included are survey items drawing on educators' pride in working in the district and belief that the district "inspires the very best performance" of its personnel. These reckonings of district's professional culture impact motivation, willingness, and capacity to engage a reform agenda. We have seen that absent positive valuation of district attitudes and support such as these, teachers feel alienated, turned-off, and inclined to expend minimal effort, and principals work to create a positive school climate within a stormy district sea. In one such district, teachers called the district attitudes toward them "infantalizing" and elected to "work to rule" (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). These teacher attitudes about their district undermine the commitment fundamental to successful school reform. And if it is difficult to carry out a productive school reform agenda in an indifferent or hostile district context, it is virtually impossible to sustain it. The further issue of whether the district administration supports a school's reform efforts is tapped by a survey item, "*District Support for School Reform Goals.*"

The level of district professionalism and support for reform goals (average teacher ratings over the four year period) significantly predicts positive *change in* teachers' ratings of school conditions promoted by the reform. The path model used to estimate the district effect on school reform progress and statistical results are shown in Figure 1.<sup>4</sup> The district effect is represented by its ability to predict school culture in 2001 after the 1998 baseline measure of school culture is controlled. The results show that information on district reform support is as useful in predicting school reform outcomes in 2001 as is information on the school culture four years earlier. Findings from longitudinal field research in BASRC schools in 12 different districts provide interpretation of this strong district effect.

Teachers' assessments of district support for whole school change capture a number of features of district-school interactions that were significant for BASRC schools. Probably most important was assistance with inquiry and evidence-based decision-making. BASRC required the schools to develop and implement a Cycle of Inquiry in order to assess progress in achieving their school's reform agenda. Schools in the Bay Area had little experience with inquiry or expertise on staff and many turned to their districts for assistance. Districts' ability and willingness to support school-level inquiry by providing data and analytical assistance were thus central to this reform agenda.

Teachers and principals also saw district support for their school reform effort in increased collaboration around curriculum development, provision of professional

Figure 1. District Effect on School Reform Progress: Teacher Survey Measures 1998 and 2001.\*



\* Note: The path model includes two measures of district reform support and three measures of school culture; a school's score on each measure is the mean of teacher responses to items in the survey scale (see Appendix C). Chi square for the estimated model is 62.73 (p<.01); school N=18.

---

development resources, and various “permissions,” such as allowing their BASRC schools to substitute their school-developed standards for district ones, to skip district professional development days in order to participate in opportunities schools felt were more closely aligned with their reform effort, or to have more flexibility in teacher hiring. Districts varied widely in their readiness and capacity to support reforming schools; such active district support for whole school change was the exception in the Collaborative (Center for Research on the Context of Teaching, 2002). Yet as the survey data indicate, the extent of district support for school reform made a significant difference in schools’ reform progress. In addition, we found that productive district-school relationships led to mutual gain; as they worked with BASRC schools, central office staff learned from the experiences of the reforming schools and improved their capacity to support school reform.<sup>5</sup>

## WHAT DOES A REFORMING DISTRICT DO?

Evidence that districts matter for school reform progress, and that a district can improve its support of school reform, begs the question of how a district operates as a dynamic, proactive agent of school reform. What does a central office do to engender its schools’ commitment to reform, and how does it learn to support reform across diverse district schools? Case studies of reforming districts and a survey of district administrators point to several key conditions that characterize reforming districts:

- a system approach to reform
- learning community at the central office level
- coherent focus on teaching and learning
- a stance of supporting professional learning and instructional improvement
- data-based inquiry and accountability.

Most fundamental to reforming districts is their focus on the system as unit of change. These districts engender shared norms of reform practice across schools through system-wide communication and strategic planning, and the central office continually improves its support of schools’ reform efforts through data-based inquiry and learning. Capacity to improve teaching and learning is developed and sustained through the system, with the district office playing particular, strategic roles to lead and support school reform.

## Taking the System as Unit of Change

A reforming district takes *itself* as the focus for change and has a clear theory of change for the system. Focusing on the system means that all schools and all elements of the district’s policy environment—the business office, human resources, the school board, the union and the broader community—are explicitly included in the reform agenda and strategic planning. Reforming districts engage in curriculum change, create standards for student performance, develop strategies for recruiting and developing teachers—activities carried out by all districts—but they do so with an express, deliberate view of the whole. The superintendent of one reforming district put it this way: “It’s not independent teacher-by-teacher that’s going to make a difference, it’s the systemic approach to that. That’s what impressed me [when I first came here]...there is a district moving forward. It’s not school-by-school, every school is a little different, but there’s a district direction.” Central office administrators and staff are united around a shared vision of improving education for all district students, a far cry from

---

the typical fragmented district office culture in which specialized functions have their own agenda and routines. Striking in the reforming districts we studied, for example, was the extent to which the heads of district business operations could articulate the district's instructional goals and defined their unit's work in those terms.

**System Communication and Shared Reform Commitment.** Reforming districts establish clear expectations for central office-school relations and take a leadership role in developing shared norms of reform practice across district schools. Their theory of change implicates the system and so stands in contrast to district reform strategies that import models of school change, such as a New American Schools model or Success for All.

San Diego's theory of change is rooted in powerful ideas about learning and instruction and features investment in people at the system level. Former Chancellor Alvarado and the Institute for Learning have made the learning and professional growth of the district's educators their top priority and keystone in the district reform initiative.

All principals attend monthly workshops; the district is divided into nine "Learning Communities" which bring together principals to engage in research, reflection, and shared experiences. The district provides summer workshops for teachers. In the first summer, more than 7,000 teachers were involved in district-sponsored sessions that were praised as the best they had ever attended.

After the first two years of Alvarado's tenure in San Diego, we found evidence of progress toward his expressed vision of making the school system a *system of schools*. In a spring 2000 survey, 97% of San Diego principals reported that "the district holds high expectations for our school" and 94% reported that "the district is committed to high standards for every student." Compared to Bay Area norms of 78% and 79% on the same two survey items, San Diego's reform leadership is striking. Further, 82% of San Diego principals reported that "district priorities are consistent with my school's priorities;" against the norm of 61% for principals of Bay Area schools, these data reveal an unusually strong coherence between system levels.

Reforming Bay Area districts also invest heavily in teachers' and principals' professional growth and learning and engage the central office staff in system thinking about school reform. In East Bay Unified School District, for example, the administrative team meets at least twice a week to address educational issues. One administrator commented on this special district practice: "Everyone is there [not just Instruction]—Personnel, Special Ed, Business, sometimes even Maintenance...so everyone gets to talk about whatever they want [in terms of what's hindering education advancement at each school." In both East Bay and Highland districts, professional development for teachers and site administrators is extensive and intensively focused on the district's goal of improving literacy instruction.

Evidence of cohesive district reform cultures in these Bay Area districts comes from survey data and comments revealing high levels of agreement among principals and teachers about reform goals and their ability to address them. For example, more than three-quarters of Highland's principals reported in a 2001 survey that common beliefs and norms of practice are held throughout the district, that they know what is expected of them as principals, and that district and school priorities are consistent. Highland teachers report that the district holds high expectations for their school (83%) and express high levels of efficacy (87%). Teachers' sense of the district's high expectations and their own professional efficacy are common across all of the district's schools—from those serving the poorest, most linguistically-diverse student population to the schools enrolling the children of more advantaged families.

---

In East Bay Unified, a similar picture of schools' commitment to district norms and sense of capacity emerges. Teachers' survey ratings of the strength of district-wide community and shared goals stand out in relation to regional norms. Elementary teachers told us "there is a focus, we have a common goal;" an elementary school principal said "this is a joint venture." Another East Bay principal highlighted the district's open communication system, as well as shared reform norms: "We're not one big happy family. Families have squabbles. But we do have a focus, we do know what we're doing, and we know why we're doing it." In our Bay Area district administrator survey, both East Bay and Highland scored significantly above norms for the region on measures of system-wide communication and distributed leadership. Norms and structures that support communication and shared reform commitments are core features of a reforming district.

**Strategic Planning at the System Level.** Reforming districts develop and sustain shared reform goals and focused efforts through system-wide planning processes. They bring together people from all levels and parts of the district system to deliberate over reform goals and outcomes, to share knowledge of successful practices, and to design strategies for change. A strategic planning process is fundamental to establishing shared accountability among district administrators, principals, and teachers for progress on agreed-upon reform goals.

In all of the interviews conducted in Highland district a consistent theme emerged: the district plans ahead, anticipates what is about to come down from the state, and uses data to make decisions. The Superintendent conveys this message most strongly:

'Strategic' in our district has become a very embedded concept. We're strategic in our thinking. We're strategic in our actions. We're certainly strategic in our planning...it's more than pushing the envelope...if the things that have been done before are not producing the results we want, then doing them better is really not necessarily going to produce the results we want. So, we've got to look at it again and rethink it. So, that notion of strategic has been very important in this organization. I think it's what's helped us be very successful.

She also noted that it took almost 10 years of planning for "goal-driven, data-driven" norms and procedures to be put in place.

An East Bay principal revealed the sense of ownership of system reform goals that comes from participating in district planning process: "I have always felt like I had so much input into whatever the district decided. And we all agree to go in the same direction." The opportunity for principals and teachers to engage in district-wide planning certainly is not the norm in the Bay Area. Rather, planning for reform in a typical district, to the limited extent that it happens, most commonly leaves out those who would implement the plans. A teacher in a typical Bay Area district commented: "We've never as a district sat down as all key teachers and talked about what we do."

In San Diego, the Institute for Learning is a key structure for engaging the whole system in developing shared commitments to district-wide goals and reform strategies. The planning process through which the district developed and adopted the Blueprint for Change—its system-wide goals for reform—was more top-down and considerably less inclusive than strategic planning in the Bay Area reforming districts. The limits on inclusive strategic planning came partly from sheer district size and also from an urgency that Chancellor Alvarado felt to establish the vision of teaching and learning that he brought from his successful reform of New York District 2 over the course of 10 years. He brought with him less experience with a theory of system change, particularly one applicable to a large district with a union unsupportive

---

of system reform. And while Superintendent Bersin actively courted the business community's support of district reform, the broader community was not engaged. Both of the Bay Area reforming districts have developed a more inclusive strategic planning process that involves parents and community members, conceptualizing their stakeholders and boundaries broadly. For example, East Bay's most recent strategic planning included district residents, business leaders, teachers, parents, administrators, classified employees, and others. The steering committee was made up of 35 people who were responsible for developing, reviewing, and revising the work of 25 broad-based focus groups. The result was a plan—including a mission statement, a vision statement, three-year goals, core values, and objectives—that is intended to guide East Bay for the next five years. In Highland's most recent round of strategic planning, district administrators brought in a teacher, parent, and principal from every school, in addition to community representatives and other outside people, to engage in dialogue and planning for district reform. They began with the question: "How are our kids doing compared to what our expectations are?" They tackled this question with a direct look at data. Again, as the superintendent emphasizes, the norms and structures for such an inclusive, effective district strategic planning process were developed over the course of a decade.

By engaging the system and stakeholders in defining problems, foci, and strategies for change, reforming districts build wide commitment to reform goals and broaden leadership for change to include school administrators, teachers, parents, and the community. A critical outcome of this process is widely shared accountability for making progress on the agreed-upon reform efforts and outcomes. The central office plays a strategic role in directing and developing resources to support all schools' continuous improvement.

## **Learning to Support School Reform Across the System**

In a reforming district, central office administrators and staff are continually working to improve their support of professional learning throughout the district and to effectively respond to schools' particular needs. They explicitly model the learning and risk-taking that are essential to effective change as they reform their own practice.

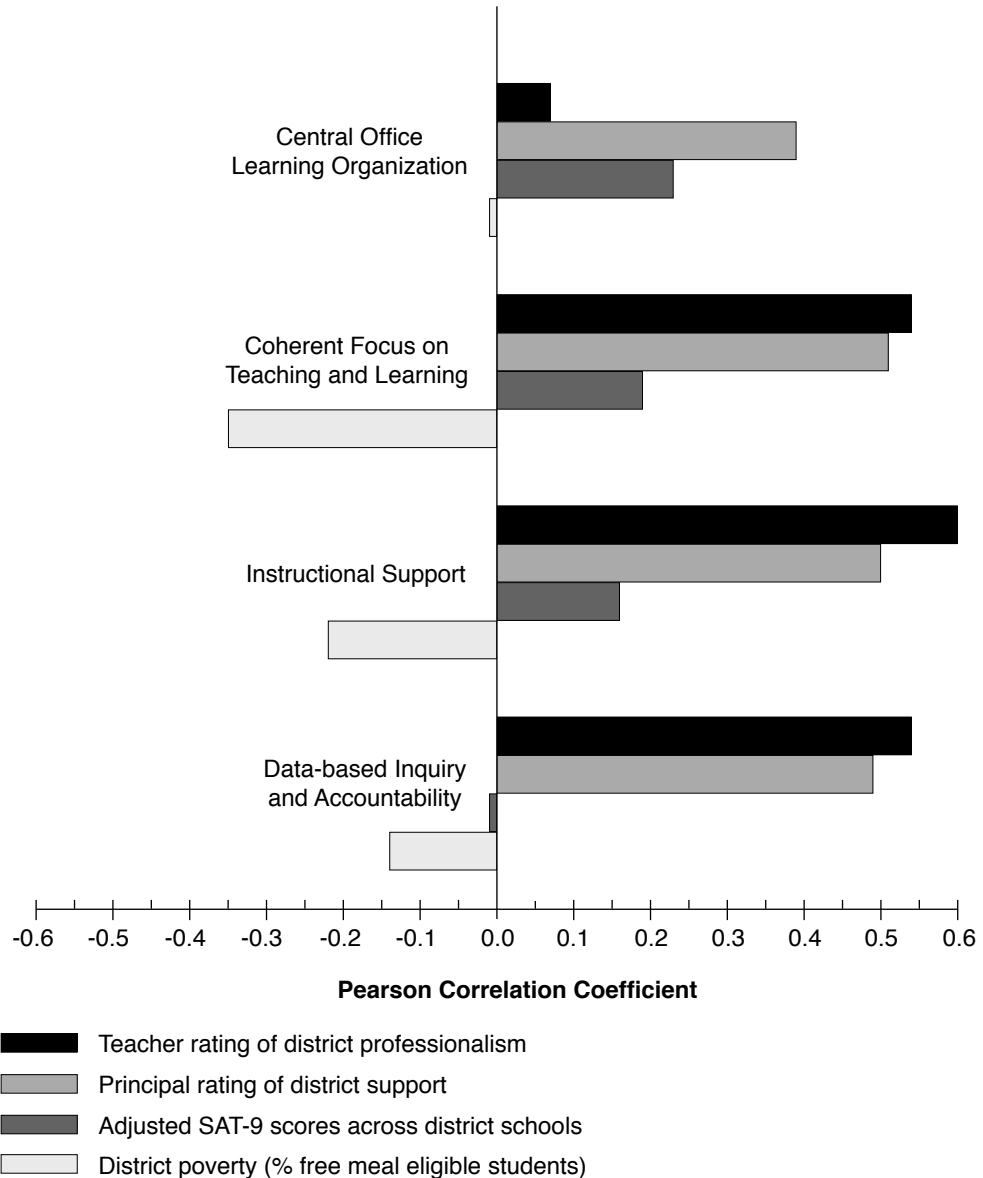
In each of the districts we studied, central administrators expressed their awareness that change can be professionally and personally threatening to principals and teachers and underscored their commitment to support the risk-taking entailed in school reform. An East Bay central office administrator commented: "It's okay to make mistakes... my philosophy is the risk-takers are the ones who help kids. We learn from mistakes. I would rather have a principal try five things and fail on three than a principal who tries zero and fails on none." Open dialogue around data on student performance supports the learning process. Several East Bay principals commented on the district's strength in terms of honesty and trust. One described the district in terms of "the free flow of information, honest, and in some cases brutal dialogue;" another said: "I personally feel confident enough to do that [have open dialogue with central office administrators] without fear of retribution... unlike the other district where I was... you ruffle feathers and you're marked for life."

Beyond providing normative support for the change process, the inquiry practices of district administrators and staff are essential to their ability to achieve equitable and effective supports for diverse students, teachers, and schools across the system.

Their learning agenda is a substantial and continuous one: tracking schools' progress and defining specialized support needs, incorporating stakeholders' input

on reform goals and engaging their support, employing resources strategically and brokering educators' access to knowledge resources, and responding to state policy developments in ways that preserve the district's strategic focus. Reforming district central offices engage in an ongoing process of improving their practice in support of system reform.

**Figure 2. District Reform Indicators: Correlations with Teacher and Principal Ratings of District Professionalism, District Poverty, and Student Test Scores Adjusted for Poverty\***



\* Note: For each district reform indicator, the bar graphs show its correlation with each of these four variables. Adjusted SAT-9 scores use 200 test data for all district schools; adjusted school scores are the actual school mean minus the expected mean using the coefficient for percent free meals in the California regression model.

---

A survey of district administrators across the Bay Area captured the pivotal role that central office inquiry and learning play in a reforming district. A measure of “Central Office Learning Community” predicted both principals’ ratings of their district’s reform support and district scores on measures of several reform roles that correlate highly with both teachers’ and principals’ ratings of district professionalism and reform support and with student test scores adjusted for student demographic predictors of academic achievement (see Figure 2).<sup>6</sup> This survey measure conveyed the extent to which: district administrators are “continually learning and seeking new ideas,” “actively involved in school reform,” and “use student assessment data as the basis for changing district curriculum.”

These data suggest that an inquiry stance at the central office level is vital to the development of a district’s reform strategies and practices. While the foci of improvement efforts in reforming districts are shaped through strategic planning processes, schools’ success depends upon how well the central office provides and learns to improve, school reform support. The survey findings, as well as case studies of reforming districts, point to three key foci for this learning—establishing a coherent focus on teaching and learning, providing instructional support that is responsive to school needs, and engendering data-based inquiry and accountability. How reforming districts achieve these central office functions varies in terms of the particular reform structures and practices they have developed over time, but each is pivotal to building a system of schools. The strong negative correlations of community poverty with district administrators’ ratings of central office reform action point to inequalities in districts’ reform leadership and capacity, an important issue to which we return later.

## **Establishing a Coherent Focus on Teaching and Learning**

Reforming districts adopt a system focus on instruction. “It’s about instruction, stupid!” says Tony Alvarado, who achieved district reform in New York City’s District 2 and forcefully pursued the same agenda in San Diego. San Diego’s aggressive concentration of district resources and energy on literacy-focused teaching and learning outcomes builds on evidence from District 2 that this agenda results in significantly improved student learning outcomes (Elmore & Burney, 1997). Coherence comes from a focus on common principles for literacy instruction at all grade levels and from the alignment of curriculum materials and professional development with these instructional principles.

Reforming districts in our Bay Area sample also focus intensively on literacy goals. Highland’s focus evolved over a period of years and reflects the strategic planning process put in place a decade ago. At the outset, the district identified 10 goals and 10 strategies. Over the years, through their planning process, the district has narrowed the focus to student achievement, set measurable targets (100% of its students meeting or exceeding district standards), and selected literacy as the strategy for addressing student achievement goals. Reflecting on the district’s progress, a central office administrator said: “I think the biggest thing [in explaining the progress we have made] is knowing what it is we wanted to do and then focusing on it.” Similarly in East Bay, a coherent, system-wide focus on literacy means that all teachers are working on the same instructional reform focus. A staff developer in the district commented, “This is district wide. A teacher can’t transfer to another school to get out of it.”

Clarity and specificity distinguish the instructional goals expressed by reforming districts. Most districts adopt multiple goals each year, with instructional progress conceived in vague terms. For example one district we studied—a relatively high achieving district—adopted three goals this year: improvement in student outcomes, facilities upgrade, and increased subsidies for teachers’ housing. Many districts specify their instruction reform goal in such elusive terms as “all students will learn to high

---

standards.” In reforming districts we find instructional goals that are specific and measurable.

One consequence of this clear focus on teaching and learning is relative consistency in the programs and resources brought into reforming districts. Central office administrators reject any district undertaking that might deflect from its particular focus on improving teaching and learning. Early in its literacy-focused reform, for example, San Diego lost National Science Foundation funding for science programs—on the grounds that the district was paying insufficient attention to science. The Bay Area district superintendents revealed a similar readiness to give up funding opportunities that did not mesh with the district’s reform mission and strategic plan. The Highland superintendent told us that though the district is involved in a number of initiatives, they were selected with care so they will all operate together, not “piece on piece.” An associate superintendent in this district said, “I think that’s the way we’ve gone after funding...what are the things that are going to help us reach our goal of student achievement? You have a vision of where you’re going and then you find the way to make it happen.”

We also see how clear, specific goals guide decisions about budget. The Highland superintendent told us that programs are reviewed each year as the district struggles to balance its budget. She explained how her district differed from others in the region:

...There is sort of a mantra or dogma that programs we might bring in must be aligned to student growth, student achievement, that they must be reevaluated. The programs that come in and that are related to student achievement, it’s constant reevaluation of those. That’s just part of the way business is done here. I’ve had so many conversations in other districts about, well, we have to keep this program because we have this person we like and it has nothing to do [with district goals]. . . well, the decision is made in the best interest of the adults.

Another important result of strong focus on teaching and learning is the district’s ability to protect their reform agenda in the face of a flood of initiatives and high stakes accountability measures coming at them from the state. Leaders in all three districts, while critical of many California education initiatives, do not worry that state pressures or policies will throw them off their course. The Highland superintendent put it this way: “Compliance has never been an issue for me...you just do it. It’s dumb stuff, so you just get that done and you keep moving in the direction you need to move.” So, for example, while the state is requiring SAT-9, the district is not backing away from its local assessments that it believes are essential to meeting equity goals.

## **Providing Instructional Support that is Responsive to School Needs**

It has become cliché for central office administrators to advertise their function in terms of “top down support for bottom up change.” But that rhetoric usually doesn’t correspond to reality in most districts where schools feel distanced or feel the resources provided them are insufficient or not in tune with their needs (CRC 2002). Most BASRC Leadership Schools, for example, saw their district as an indifferent player at best in their reform work, or worse, as an obstacle—indifferent because they lent a deaf ear to expressed needs and an obstacle because districts were insensitive to site-level reform agenda.

Reforming districts invest heavily in school reform and do it more effectively than do most districts. They lead, support, and leverage school reform. One of the first things Bersin and Alvarado did in San Diego was to revamp the district’s central office to better serve schools. The district’s human resources, facilities, and business

---

departments were critically reviewed and restructured to be a more effective resource for schools. Principals were promised 24-hour response to their requests and were assured that a person would take their calls, not the hated answering machine. Bay Area reforming districts likewise evolved a trim central office and established express norms of responsiveness to schools. All Highland district staff interviews echoed the comment of an associate superintendent who said: “The whole purpose of the instructional department [is] to serve... we work to make things better at the school sites.... I would never have left a school site [to join the central office] if I didn’t feel I was still working for schools.” East Bay Unified administrators expressed the same norm of service to district schools. As one administrator put it: “I never considered my position to be a power position at all. It is a service position.”

Reforming districts seek out and use cutting-edge practices, most especially in professional development where they have reallocated resources to provide site-based resources that reflect best thinking about how to foster teachers’ learning and instructional capacity. San Diego and the Bay Area districts provide school-based literacy coaches and other supports, especially for beginning teachers. Teachers express enthusiasm for these site resources, and point particularly to the increased competence they feel carrying out the district literacy program in ways that respond to diverse student backgrounds. Teachers in all three districts also give district-level events highest marks, in stark contrast to usual groans about district “inservice.” One Highland teacher proudly told us, “If I go to any [outside] workshops now I’ve been prepared so well and so have my other colleagues that we almost feel we could do the presentations. They call it the ‘[Highland] curse.’ We have been to so many workshops and we really feel like we are way ahead of the other districts, in literacy especially.” The new superintendent of this Bay Area district commented “the conversations I’m hearing [at workshops and trainings] are of a much higher level [than other places I’ve worked]. It’s obvious that the staff development that has taken place here has been effective.”

These high quality professional development supports were purchased within the same fiscal constraints as operate in other California districts. Districts managed this expensive site-support by ransacking their budgets to find the necessary funds. San Diego reallocated ESEA Title I dollars and various state funds, notably the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment program (BTSA). Bay Area districts also used BTSA funds and were aggressive in seeking other supports for these site-based coaches.

Reforming districts attend to the professional development needs of principals. San Diego saw principals as key to their reform agenda, and focused on their learning even before that of teachers. Bay Area districts developed learning opportunities for their principals based on feedback from principals that they needed occasions to come together and needed professional learning resources. In a system-wide culture of school reform, principals are crucial linchpins in constructing and conveying a district theory of instructional improvement.

Reforming districts use some conventional district management tools in unconventional ways to support school reform. For example, Highland uses teacher evaluation as a way to foster school-level learning and change. The district offers an alternative evaluation for tenured teachers that allows them to carry out an action research project of their own design. Teachers work with their principals to formulate a research question, identify relevant data and specify outcomes they will measure. Principals report that changes in classroom practices have resulted from these teacher projects. One extremely enthusiastic principal said: “I love the project because it’s letting them work on something that they really want to work on. It’s improving what they’re doing in the classroom because they’re going to choose something that they feel that they need to do.”

---

Building teachers' trust in district administrators' commitment and ability to support their learning and change is key to an effective district instructional support role. An East Bay administrator commented: "There is a strong relationship between the district and the schools in that sites are starting to trust and realize that the district office is there to be of help to them...and that their opinions are important." A long-time East Bay assistant superintendent pointed to the district's commitment to system goals and supporting schools' progress as key to building this trust and district reform capacity: "The question always came up in terms of 'is this going to serve the interests of the schools? Or is it just something that we want to do because it is what we want to do?' ...We always make sure that we're doing it not for our own needs and interests but for the sake of the schools and the kids."

The instructional supports provided schools by reforming districts differ in both kind and degree from resources furnished schools in other districts. They are of very high quality, they are intensive and site-focused, and they are designed in response to teachers' expressed needs and evidence about student learning. They are exceptional in the high marks teachers and principals award them.

## **Engendering Data-Based Inquiry and Accountability**

Reforming districts establish accountability for student outcomes up and down the system and with local stakeholders. In San Diego, principals are held accountable for their school's student performance, most particularly the performance and growth shown by students in the lowest quartile. Bay Area reforming districts hold schools accountable for goals established as part of their strategic planning process and hold themselves accountable for supporting their schools' success.

Reforming Bay Area districts' experiences show that feedback and clear channels of communication about student outcomes and indicators of instructional progress are vital to an effective system of accountability. These districts collect and examine data to set goals and to identify improvement plans at all levels of the system—from the central office to the school to the teacher and to the individual student.

Both districts' strategic planning system uses data collected from schools, district offices, and the community as grounds for yearly review and adjustment. The districts place utmost importance on assessment; and in addition to the standardized tests required by the state, they have spent years developing performance-based assessments in reading, writing, and math. They regularly disaggregate their data "to set our targets" particular to subgroups of students and schools. Districts also use portfolios so that their students will have opportunities other than test-based assessment to show progress. "We want to determine if the things we are providing are curing the right illness," said one superintendent. "What are the underlying causal factors?"

These districts also work to improve the quality of data on student performance that they provide to teachers and to parents. Highland initiated a strategy to get comprehensive individual student data to teachers electronically, with software that would enable them to track the progress of individuals and groups defined by race, ethnicity, and language status. Technical start-up snags in this process have drawn some criticism from teachers and principals. One principal chided: "Their interest is in data. I mean data with a capital D-A-T-A." Despite gripes about the new data management system, however, teachers and principals applaud the fact that they have information they need for planning and assessment readily available. East Bay's district assessment resource teachers commented on a growing demand for data in the district:

---

Our theory...is that we use data and student work to drive instruction. I've seen within the last year more requests from principals and teachers, 'Can I have an analysis of the data? A summary? Can you reorganize the data for me?' My work has almost doubled to provide resources for schools. We had a theory which now is becoming action.

Strategic planning and the data-based decision-making that goes along with it also enable districts to be proactive in responding to state accountability pressures. For example, a Highland district administrator told us:

Usually we're a kind of district that we sense what's coming...and that's part of strategic planning ... you do an internal and external scan. So you look at what the state's doing to you, what society's doing, the change in demographics. So you're creating your future, you're not reacting. We never react to what the state has coming down. We usually have something in our back pocket or we know what we're doing to meet what the state is requiring. A lot of other districts [say] 'Let's wait and see what really is going to happen.' So we've usually started the process.

In both of these reforming Bay Area districts, educators credit the strategic planning with an unusual degree of open communication. Data on programs and funds are available to all. "Nobody's hiding anything in this district," said a principal. "Nobody's trying to covet any particular program. And so it's...really open."

San Diego's reform is in process and does not yet have comprehensive systems of data collection, analysis, or feedback. Its absence is an acknowledged problem for the district since basic data to manage change are not available in a timely manner to educators from the central office staff down to school personnel. The result is miscommunication, anxiety over performance outcomes, and the lack of the information needed to make decisions about how to allocate resources. Bay Area districts show by contrast how essential comprehensive data and effective feedback are to reform at both distinct and school levels, and how comfort and competence with data grow over time.

Each of the reforming districts was actively developing and refining systems for managing reform and welcomed data from our research, as well as from their own inquiry, to refine their support for instructional improvement. For example, Highland teacher survey results pointed to weak professional development in mathematics instruction, which prompted the central office to expand and deepen its support in this content area. Our cross-site analyses of trends in student outcomes were also of interest to the reforming districts. For example, we analyzed trends in gap-closing across schools and districts in the Bay Area and in California, and these norms were useful to the districts for evaluating their reform success. The data reported in Table 1 capture a two-year trend in the middle of our field research in these districts (1999-2000), highlighting accomplishments and challenges for the reforming districts. Each of the districts had significantly out-performed the average district in closing achievement gaps related to student socio-economic status within all district schools. East Bay and San Diego had exceeded normal rates of gap-closing for Hispanic students, and San Diego exceeded gap-closing for African American students.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 1. Reforming districts' rate of closing student achievement gaps\*: Comparison with regional and state norms, 1999-2000.**

CLOSING ACHIEVEMENT GAP FOR:	DISTRICT			Bay Area mean	CA mean
	Highland	East Bay	San Diego		
Disadvantaged students	75%	67%	64%	49%	51%
Hispanic students	44%	89%	66%	58%	63%
African-American students	NA	NA	71%	63%	64%

\*Note: The percentage of district schools closing a particular achievement gap is reported. NA indicates that no district schools had disaggregated data for a particular student group or its comparison group.

The reforming districts were interested in results of our comparative analyses of district organizational conditions reported in this paper. And they were heartened by evidence from our research that district reform measures predict student outcomes across the 58 Bay Area districts we surveyed. We used a path model such as that shown in Figure 1 to estimate effects on student learning gains of a global measure of district reform action (using survey indicators of central office learning community, coherent focus on teaching and learning, instructional support, and data-based inquiry and accountability) and found a statistically significant district effect. Districts that took a relatively active role in school reform showed significantly greater gains on students' SAT-9 scores between 1998 and 2001.<sup>8</sup> These findings on system-level gains in student achievement were encouraging to central office administrators and staff who struggled with equity challenges.

Reforming districts improve system performance by using data on trends in organizational conditions and student achievement within and across schools to focus their reform efforts and to refine their supports for individual schools. We found considerable evidence from our field research and from quantitative analysis of reform outcomes that such district practice results in improved teaching and learning. As reported, both teacher and principal ratings of their district's professionalism and support track closely with district reform action, and district reform action predicts both schools' progress toward organizational conditions conducive to ongoing improvement and gains in students' academic performance across the system.

## REVISITING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM ABOUT DISTRICT REFORM

These districts provide exceptions to the general observation that districts cannot undertake or sustain serious system reform. Autopsies of failed efforts and analyses of ineffectual initiatives offer up a number of obstacles to significant system change, efforts which involve something more than repackaging business as usual. Among the major culprits believed to stymie district reform are school-level resistance to a strong central office role, personnel turnover, and the politics of local education reform (Fullan, 2001; Hess, 1999). The reforming districts featured here provide instructive exception to conventional wisdom—or myths—about district reform.

### Myth 1: Teachers and Schools Resist a Strong Central Office Role

Distinctive in reforming districts is their strategic conception of roles and functions at different levels of the system. The central office and the schools have mutually reinforcing but different roles in defining and advancing a strong reform agenda. The central office assumes responsibility for defining goals and standards

---

for teaching and learning, allocating resources to the school level, and providing the supports principals and teachers need to be successful in meeting district-established standards. And, in reforming Bay Area districts, schools are assigned significant authority and responsibility. Principals and teachers are responsible for defining school-specific teaching and learning goals, allocating professional development resources, and developing strategies for evaluating their progress. School administrators are clear that their professional discretion does not comprise “site-based management” as it exists in other districts because overall budgets are built at the district level with attention to equity.

Teachers and principals appreciate this strong district role because they feel the district provides both clear standards and effective support. Responding to a district wide survey, for example, almost 90% of Highland’s principals said that the district helped their school develop and maintain high standards, and almost 70% reported that the district helped them promote and nurture a focus on teaching and learning. A principal said: “Our district, unlike the other district I was in, is really out there, and they’re really working with the teachers. [District support and responsiveness to school needs] are a real plus because that does not happen in most places.” District support translates into teachers’ sense of capacity. The vast majority of teachers in the district report that they are well prepared to create equitable learning opportunities for the district’s increasingly diverse student population, a major challenge to California’s teaching force.

A number of factors contribute to these reforming districts’ successes in defining distinct central office and school responsibilities. For one, clear and consensual goals allow districts to assign significant authority to schools. The Bay Area districts’ inclusive planning processes have featured teacher involvement in decisions regarding teaching and instruction as a vital element of their strategic planning. A long-time central office administrator explained: “A strength [of our district] is that we’ve never worked top-down. We’ve always involved teachers and sometimes it’s frustrating and it takes longer. But there’s always been the intent to have ownership where it counts.”

An important lesson from these districts is that it is not necessarily the *strength* of the district role that affects teachers’ morale and view of the district, but rather *what* that role is and *how* it is carried out. Bay Area reforming districts, where the district role has been developed over more than a decade, show that when teachers feel they are involved, treated fairly, the typical “them/us” tensions dissolve. For example, one district’s teachers’ union president said, “The classroom is supported fairly well as opposed to monies going into the central office and never seeing the light of day again.” The community generally shares this view of central office priorities. A parent commented: “It’s a district that cares about making sure that the schools are okay before taking care of the district office.”

In contrast to conventional wisdom that teachers will resent a strong district presence in their practice, teacher survey responses in Highland reveal extremely high teacher ratings of their district’s professionalism. Eighty-one percent say that the “district is committed to high standards for every student,” 79% report they are “proud to tell others I work for this district,” and most say they take an active role in school-wide decision making, feel encouraged to experiment with their teaching, and are supported by colleagues to try out new ideas.

These Bay Area districts defy the assertion that strong district authority and action squelch school-level innovation and responsiveness. Proponents of charter schools and choice models base their position in part on the propensity of districts to follow a “one size fits all strategy” and ignore school-level differences. A cookie-cutter management style indeed has characterized most districts, where anything

---

other than equal treatment risks contentious community political fallout or union opposition. In contrast to this typical district approach to allocating resources, these Bay Area reforming districts' strategic planning processes provide data and the broad-based buy in that allows them to target resources differentially to schools, based on demonstrated need. Once the money gets to the schools, however, principals and teachers have the greatest say in what to spend it on and what kinds of district support they will receive.

Standardized district policy for school reform support also has been challenged in discussions about equity for students. Educators and community members in the reforming districts we studied are clear that equity for students does not mean equal treatment. Highland's superintendent commented: "Well, what's fair? Fair isn't the equal treatment of unequals. Fair is trying to support people at the level that they need support." She noted that infighting rarely resulted from these decisions: "I think we build a caring community because we looked at each other's data, never to embarrass anybody...there were times when one school would want to allocate some of their money to another school because they needed it more." Indeed, and contrary to the norm, Highland teachers' survey ratings of resource adequacy in their school were positively related to school poverty; this pattern reflects the district's response to the special needs of schools serving high proportions of poor and English learner students. The strong and express district role in advancing and protecting equity suggests that the school-level control promoted by many reformers may be a fundamentally undemocratic strategy from the perspective of a school system.

The experiences of the Bay Area reforming districts move debate about district role beyond centralization/decentralization dichotomies to feature the responsibilities and functions assigned to each level of the system. The salient issue in reforming districts is how to be tactical about *what* decisions are made where and how responsibilities follow. San Diego's experience with reform backlash raises considerations of district size as it affects challenges and tactics for building teacher support and school involvement in education reform. Our 2001 teacher survey of a representative sample of San Diego teachers documented considerable dissatisfaction with the district central office and, in particular, the ways in which district leaders directed instructional reform in the system. Practicalities of communicating a vision of teaching and learning and broadening reform leadership to include schools and their communities are considerably more complex in a district the size of San Diego than in the mid-sized Bay Area districts we studied.

## **Myth 2: Turnover and Change Will Sink Reform Efforts**

Leadership turnover can derail district efforts to establish and sustain a consistent reform agenda. Boards' tendencies to search for a district leader with a different style or goals (often in response to disappointment with the achievements of the departing superintendent) contributes to "churn" in district level goals and norms. Bay Area reforming districts offer instructive exception to conventional wisdom about the destabilizing consequences of leadership change.

When the visionary Highland superintendent responsible for the strategic planning process left, core district norms and functions proceeded as they had in the past because the superintendent had taken care to integrate them throughout the system, using the planning process. A central office administrator reflected on the coming of a new superintendent: "I would like to think that we will continue on with the new leadership and that the base we've built and the good things we've done will be like a springboard to move even farther on." Another said:

---

She's built a team and a structure and a vision that will outlive her... we all know where we're going. We might slow down a little... [but] there's so much in place that now's the time to implement it and drive it deeper. I'm sure that it won't look exactly the same because everyone has a unique style in how they do things, but I think the direction and the vision and the planning that's been put into place won't miss a beat because it's in motion. There's a strong commitment to the way we're moving with data and technology and instruction.

The transition was smooth, even in the context of other changes in central office administrative staffing, including two new assistant superintendents and several job changes among the remaining staff. Despite this considerable change, Highland's programs and policies supporting teachers and priorities for system change stayed on track and moved forward.

In both Bay Area districts discussed here, turnover in top leadership positions did not trigger significant change in district priorities or norms because, over time, planning processes and inclusive communication strategies had made them part of the fabric of district culture.

### **Myth 3: Local Politics Will Defeat a Serious Reform Agenda**

The strong, clear statements of purpose and priority found in these reforming districts counter the view that superintendents can advance only general goals, priorities unlikely to offend anyone. Conventional wisdom advises district leaders to advance broad goals with something for everyone, especially in districts serving a diverse student population. Superintendents and their boards, observers assert, have strong incentives to choose flashy, inoffensive reform strategies—reforms that “maximize political impact and minimize potential adverse reaction.” (Hess, 1999: 123.)

Yet, leaders in each reforming district articulated unambiguous goals and priorities. Strong boards of education, carefully built and tended for more than a decade to provide consistent direction and allied backing, enabled Bay Area superintendents to navigate local political waters and protect a strong district role.

The former Highland superintendent sees board relations as the *sine qua non* of a reforming district:

[T]he one key thing, number one... resides in the relationship between the board and the superintendent. I would never have been able to move in the directions that I've moved if I didn't have those people along with me, and I've worked very hard at that. I've worked hard at not just educating the board on a variety of issues, but I worked very hard on who was on my board.

The result of these efforts was a cohesive board that functioned smoothly with little political posturing.

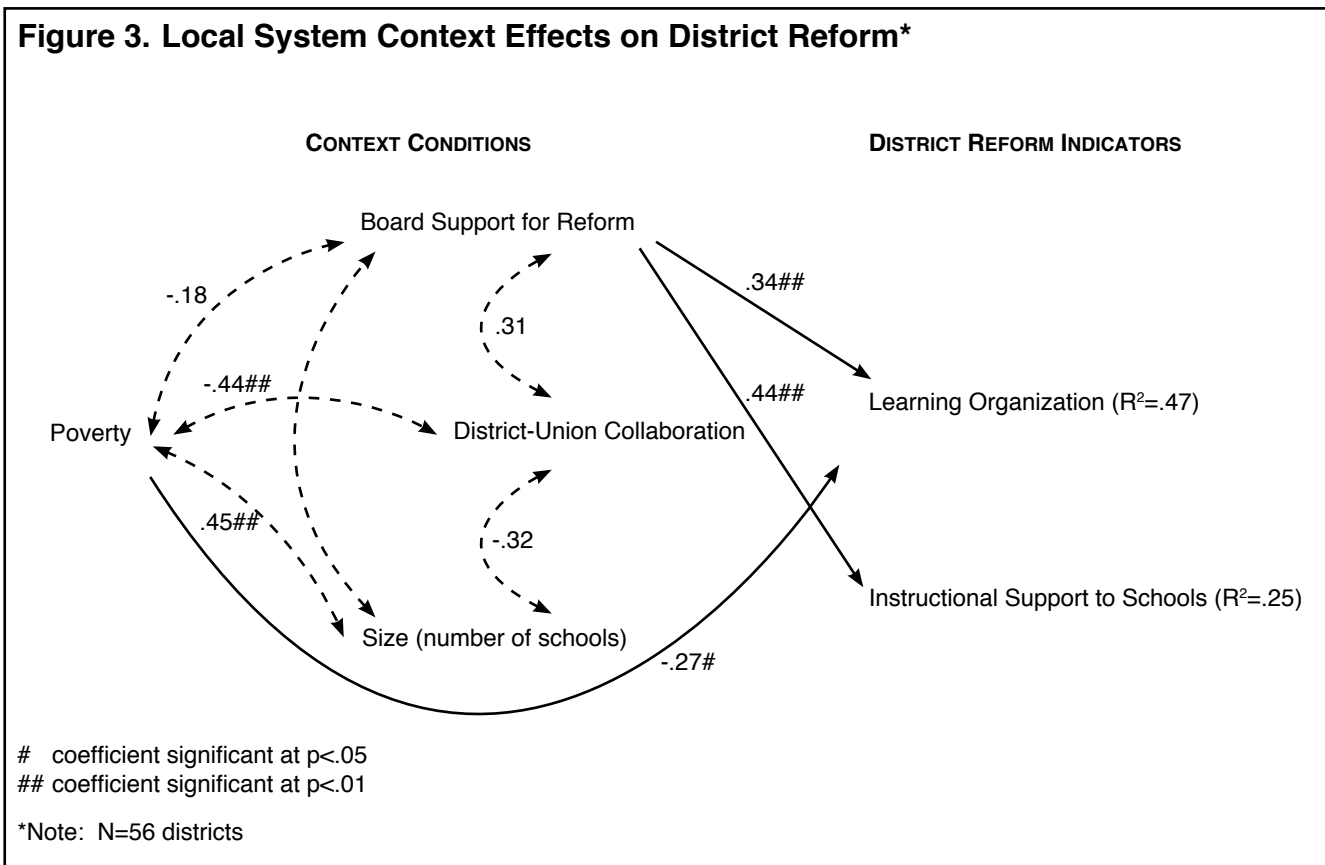
District administrators point to the strategic planning process as another strategy for maintaining strong board support. Strategic planning builds a base and buy-in for implementing plans and, an associate superintendent said, “It brings resources to [the plan] because the board is always very conscious about parent input and the base of decision making.”

San Diego's leaders enjoy no such board support, but confront a bitterly divided 3-2 board. Their base initially derived from the business community and the reform agenda it developed in response to dissatisfaction with prior leadership. The business

community purposively sought the reform agenda Bersin and Alvarado defined, and they expected fundamental change. But the fragility of the San Diego reform lies in its split board—with reform opponents supported by the union and by school communities that define the reforms as contrary to their interests—that may ultimately elect to fire the superintendent and discard the reform. In this regard, these district reformers suffer from the absence of the data and communication structures that Bay Area reforming districts use effectively to build a broad base of support.

Further evidence of the school board’s key role in system reform comes from our Bay Area district survey. District administrators’ ratings of their board’s support of district reform provides the only significant predictor of key indicators of district reform—central office learning organization and instructional support (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Local System Context Effects on District Reform\***



Across the 58 Bay Area districts included in the survey, it appears that board support plays a stronger role in district reform action than do collaborative relationships with the teachers’ union, sometimes seen as a necessary condition for change. At the same time, these conditions are related to each other and to district size and poverty. The syndrome of district context conditions revealed by the data in Figure 3 helps explain the negative correlations between poverty and district reform indicators that we observed earlier. Districts serving the poorest communities are larger and more likely to have a history of contentious union-district relationships. The lack of a significant correlation between poverty and board support for district reform in this model is notable. Most likely this reflects some school boards’ proactive response to the poor performance of students in highest-poverty districts. This pattern is promising, given evidence that the board’s stance on school and system reform is an important constraint or enabler of district’s reform action.

---

## CONCLUSION

The experience and evolution of district-level reform in Bay Area districts teach some not surprising lessons—that system change takes time and that a supportive school board is critical to system learning and risk taking. San Diego has undertaken system-level change, but the jury is out on how a divided school board will ultimately affect the district’s reform effort.

Context conditions particular to large urban districts pose special challenges for district reform action that are only hinted at in this analysis. While we highlight the roles that distinguish reforming systems from typical districts across the spectrum of size and demographics, comparative analysis of large urban districts undertaking system reform is needed to address issues of how reform leaders can effectively work to achieve conditions for continual improvement. Challenges include: how to create a central office learning community out of a fragmented department structure, how to build broad commitment and knowledge for leading focused and coherent instructional improvement, how to build two-way communication between a large number of schools and district staff that is essential to customized instructional support, and how to develop data-based system accountability when powerful parents may lobby to maintain their school’s autonomy and privilege. All reforming districts address these challenges, but the scale and context conditions of large urban districts present special constraints and opportunities for system change. It will be important to identify practices that prove to be effective particularly in such districts.

That said, the experiences of these three school districts add to what we know about reforming districts and the strategic roles that central office administrators and staff can play in system reform. Also, our survey data for districts across the Bay Area make clear that central office support of school reform makes a difference for teaching and student learning outcomes across the system. A strategic conception of district roles and functions—one that considers context, reform stages, and the division of responsibilities and leadership between system levels—appears critical to school reform. Our research provides evidence that a weak central office limits schools’ reform progress and suggests some of the ways in which a reforming district leadership works to advances equitable and sustainable school reform.

As self-conscious “learning organizations,” reforming districts promote and invest in learning throughout the system – in the central office, in schools, in cross-school teacher networks, in units such as the business office that typically are excluded from professional development focused on instruction. The Bay Area districts’ commitment to strategic planning enables them to avoid “competency traps” (March, 1994); annual reviews of programs and resource allocation ask tough questions about progress on district goals and needed adjustments. Their organizational culture makes “self-correction a norm and not a war” (Sarason, 1991, p.129).

The experiences of San Diego and the Bay Area districts also highlight the critical role that the district plays in achieving educational equity and closing achievement gaps between student populations. Neither school reform initiatives nor state or federal accountability systems can effectively address inequality in students’ educational opportunities across schools and tailor site-specific supports to meet their needs. We see reforming districts as context and strategy for realizing the nation’s educational equity goal.

---

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The size distribution of California school districts, as in all states, is highly skewed toward small districts with one or few schools, making the districts in the 10-15 school range that we studied “middle-sized” schools.
- <sup>2</sup> Further, San Diego’s systematic effort to transfer the theory-based reform model successful in New York City District 2 to a larger urban district has gained national attention and import.
- <sup>3</sup> In BASRC’s Phase Two, beginning in 2001-02, the district was defined as a partner in school reform and required to support BASRC schools in their reform work; in 2002-03, district system reform became a focus of BASRC’s work to scale up inquiry-based school reform in the region.
- <sup>4</sup> The model uses two indicators of District Reform Support and three indicators of School Culture (unmeasured theoretical variables in the model). The district effect on change is represented by the path coefficient for District Reform Support on 2001 school culture after 1998 school culture is controlled. School poverty is included as a control variable given its correlation with both baseline school conditions and district support. Note that high-poverty schools report significantly less district support.
- <sup>5</sup> The correlations between change in district support for school reform (2001-1998 scale scores) and change in a school’s inquiry practices (2001-1998 scale scores) is  $+.34$  ( $p < .01$ ).
- <sup>6</sup> The district survey scales featured here were developed through a) the design of survey questions to tap district norms and practices highlighted in prior field research on district reform, b) principal components analysis of district administrators’ responses to survey items, and c) analysis of the predictive validity of survey scales developed through this process, using teacher and principal survey ratings of their district as criteria.
- <sup>7</sup> The low rate of gap-closing for Hispanic students noted for Highland partly reflects the concentration of Hispanic students in a few elementary schools; reform effects show up in school gains rather than in gap-closing within schools. Gap-closing data for African American students in Highland and East Bay are not reported because no schools have sufficient numbers to warrant disaggregated data.
- <sup>8</sup> The path model and statistical procedures used for this assessment were the same as those shown diagrammatically in Figure 1. Coefficients for this model are  $.12$  ( $p < .05$ ) for district effect on the aggregate 2001 SAT-9 score,  $.87$  for 1998 SAT-9 score effect on 2001SAT-9 score, and  $.61$  for 1998 correlation between 1998 SAT-9 score and district culture.

---

## REFERENCES

- Bodilly, S. J. (1998). *Lessons from new American Schools' Scale-up Phase; Prospects for bringing designs to multiple schools*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND. (MR-1777-NAS).
- Bryk, A., Sebring, P.B., Kerbow, D., Rollow, S., & Easton, J.Q. (1998). *Charting Chicago school reform*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Center for Research on the Context of Teaching. (2002). *Bay Area School Reform Collaborative: Phase one (1996-2001) evaluation*. Stanford University: Author.
- Chubb, J. E. & Moe, T.M. (1990). *Politics, markets, and America's schools*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute.
- Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S.L. (2001). Beyond certainty: Taking an inquiry stance on practice. In A. Lieberman and L. Miller, (Eds.) *Teachers caught in the action: Professional development that matters*. New York: Teaches College Press. pp. 45-58.
- Cuban, L. (1990) Reforming again and again. *Educational Researcher*, 19, 3-13.
- Elmore, R. F. (1996). Getting to scale with good educational practice. *Harvard Educational Review* 66, 1-26.
- Elmore, R. F., & Burney, D. (1997). *Investing in teacher learning: Staff development and instructional improvement in Community School District #2, New York City*. New York, NY: National Commission on Teaching & America's Future.
- Elmore, R. F., & Burney, D. (1998). *School variation and systemic instructional improvement in Community School District #2, New York City*. Unpublished report. Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education/ University of Pennsylvania.
- Elmore, R. F. & Burney, D. (1999). Investing in teacher learning: Staff development and instructional improvement. In L. Darling-Hammond & Sykes, G. (Eds.) *Teaching as the learning profession: Handbook of policy and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Fullan, M. (2001). *The new meaning of educational change*. Third edition. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Fullan, M. & Hargreaves, A. (1992). *What's worth fighting for? Working together for your school*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Ontario Ministry of Education.
- Hargreaves, A. & Fullan, M. (1998). *What's worth fighting for out there*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hess, F. M. (1999). *Spinning wheels: The politics of urban school reform*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution Press.
- Hill, P. (1995). *Reinventing public education*. Santa Monica, CA: Institute on Education and Training, The Rand Corporation.
- House, N. Gerry (2000). Educating all of the city's children. in Senge, P, Cambron-McCabe, N., Lucas, T., Smith, B., Dutton, J. & Kleiner, A. *Schools that learn: A fifth discipline fieldbook for educators, parents, and everyone who cares about education*. New York: Doubleday. pp. 303-309.
- Ladd, H. F. (Ed.). (1996).  *Holding schools accountable*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings.
- Lewis, A. C. (1995). *Believing in ourselves: Progress and struggles in urban middle school reform*. New York: Edna McConnell Clark Foundation.

- 
- March, J. G. (1994). *A primer on decision making: How decisions happen*. New York: The Free Press.
- Massell, D. & M. Goertz (1999). Local strategies for building capacity: The district role in supporting instructional reform. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association, Montreal, Canada.
- McDonald, J. P., Hatch, T., Kirby, E., Ames, N., Haynes, N.M. & Joyner, E.T. (1999). *School reform behind the scenes*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- McLaughlin, M. W. & Talbert, J. E. (1993). *Contexts that matter for teaching and learning*. Stanford, CA: Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching.
- McLaughlin, M. W. & Talbert, J. E. (2001). *Professional communities and the work of high school teaching*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Newmann, F. M. & Wehlage, G. (Eds.). (1995). *Successful school restructuring: A report to the public and educators by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin.
- Newmann, F.M., and Associates (1996). *Authentic Achievement: Restructuring Schools for Intellectual Quality*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass
- Rosenholtz, S. J. (1989). *Teachers' workplace: The social organization of schools*. New York: Longman.
- Sarason, S. (1991). *The predictable failure of school reform*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Sarason, S. (1996). *Revisiting the culture of school and the problem of change*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of a learning organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Sergiovanni, T. (1994). *Building community in schools*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Spear, S. & Bowen, H.K., (1999). Decoding the DNA of the Toyota Production System, *Harvard Business Review*, September-October: 97-106.
- Spillane, J. P. (1994). How districts mediate between state policy and teachers' practice. In R. F. Elmore & S. H. Fuhrman (Eds.), *The governance of curriculum* (pp. 167-185). Washington, DC: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Spillane, J. P. (1996). School districts matter: Local educational authorities and state instructional policy. *Educational Policy*, 10(1): 63-87.
- Spillane, J. (1998). A cognitive perspective on the LEA's role in implementing instructional policy: Accounting for local variability. *Education Administration Quarterly*, 43 (1), 31-57.
- Spillane, J. (Spring 2000). Cognition and policy implementation: District policy-makers and the reform of mathematics education. *Cognition and Instruction*.
- Spillane, J. P. & Thompson, C. L. (1997). Reconstructing conceptions of local capacity: The local education agency's capacity for ambitious instructional reform. *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 19(2): 185-203.
- Togneri, W. & Anderson, S.E. (2003). *Beyond islands of excellence: What districts can do to improve instruction and achievement in all schools*. Washington, D.C.: Learning First Alliance.

---

Tyack, D. & Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering toward utopia: A century of public school reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wagner, T. (2000). *How schools change: Lessons from three communities revisited*. Second Edition. New York: Routledge Falmer.

---

# APPENDIX A

## Teacher Survey Scales

### School Culture Indicators

#### **Inquiry practices (5 point Likert scale, 5 items. Alpha=.86)**

*Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the statements regarding professional development and the reform climate in your school.*

- My school has a clear vision of reform that is linked to standards for student learning and growth.
- My school encourages teachers to pursue inquiry into their classroom practice.
- Progress toward the school's teaching vision is openly examined and acknowledged.
- Teachers collect and use data to improve their teaching.
- My school has made changes designed to better meet the needs of our diverse student body.

#### **Teacher learning community (5 point Likert scale, 4 items. Alpha=.84)**

*Now consider the professional climate in your school. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about general school climate.*

- I feel supported by colleagues to try out new ideas.
- Teachers in this school are encouraged to experiment with their teaching.
- Teachers in this school trust each other.
- Teachers in this school feel responsible to help each other do their best.

#### **Collective problem solving (5 point Likert scale, 4 items. Alpha=.83)**

*Now consider the professional climate in your school. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about general school climate.*

- In this school we take steps to solve problems, we don't just talk about them.
- The faculty has an effective process for making group decisions and solving problems.

*Please mark the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about your school.*

- Teachers take an active role in schoolwide decision making.
- Useful information to make informed decisions is readily available to teachers (e.g., about student performance, resources, community satisfaction).

---

## District Reform Indicators

### **District Professionalism (5 point Likert scale, 11 items. Alpha=.96; Note: this scale was replicated in the principal survey)**

*Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the statements regarding the district in which you teach.*

- I feel that this district inspires the very best in the job performance of its teachers.
- I am proud to tell others that I work for this district.
- The district supports local innovation.
- The district holds high expectations for our school.
- The district builds community confidence in our school.
- The district supports my school's whole school change effort.
- The district promotes the professional development of teachers.
- The district ensures that student learning is the "bottom line" in this school.
- The district helps my school focus on teaching and learning.
- The district is committed to high standards for every student.
- District priorities are consistent with my school's priorities.

### **District Support for Reform Goals (5 point likert scale, 1 item)**

*Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the statements regarding the district in which you teach.*

- District's support of our school's reform goals.

---

## APPENDIX B

### District Administrator Survey Scales

#### District Reform Indicators

##### Central Office Learning Organization (5 point Likert scale, 3 items; $\alpha=.72$ )

*Now consider the following statements about working conditions in the district's central office. To what extent do you agree with each?*

- District administrators are continually learning and seeking new ideas.
- Assessment of student performance leads to changes in our district's curriculum.
- This district is actively involved in school reform.

##### Coherent Focus on Teaching and Learning (5 point Likert scale, 9 items; $\alpha=.94$ )

*Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements regarding how your district works with schools.*

- This district promotes the professional development of teachers.
- This district ensures that student learning is the "bottom line" in school.
- This district helps schools focus on teaching and learning.
- This district builds community confidence in our schools.
- This district is committed to high standards for every student.
- District priorities are consistent with school's priorities.
- This district has consistent standards from school to school.
- This district uses data as a basis for decision-making.
- This district emphasizes academic standards at all levels of the system.

##### Instructional Support (5 point Likert scale, 4 items; $\alpha=.84$ )

*Please indicate the extent to which your district provides each of the following kinds of support for school improvement.*

- This district helps principals promote and nurture a focus on teaching and learning in school.
- This district supports schools' efforts to be accountable to their own local communities.
- This district provides support to enable teachers to adjust curriculum and instruction to meet all students' individual needs.
- This district helps schools set benchmarks and evaluate progress toward school and district standards.

##### Data-based Inquiry and Accountability (5 point Likert scale, 3 items; $\alpha=.69$ )

*Please read each of these statements about leadership and indicate how common it is in your district.*

- Leaders create structure, time, and resources to support learning.
- Leaders challenge others to find, clarify, and solve problems.
- Leaders use data and inquiry to create shared responsibility and accountability for high standards and equitable learning results.

---

## District Context Conditions

### Board Reform Support (5 point Likert scale, 4 items; alpha=.89)

*Now consider the following statements about working conditions in the district's central office. To what extent do you agree with each?*

- The Board of Education is supportive of reform efforts in this district and schools.
- The Board of Education promotes inquiry as the basis for reform in this district and schools.
- Members of the Board of Education are in agreement about important matters of education.
- The Board of Education has been a catalyst for reform in this district.

### District-Union Collaboration (5 point Likert scale, 1 item)

*Now consider the following statements about working conditions in the district's central office. To what extent do you agree with each?*

- District-Union relationships are currently harmonious.

---

## APPENDIX C

### District Reform Indicators: Intercorrelations\*

DISTRICT REFORM INDICATOR	Learning Organization	Focus on Teaching and Learning	Instructional Support	Data-based Accountability
Central office learning organization	1.0			
Coherent focus on teaching and learning	.28**	1.0		
Instructional support	.42***	.14	1.0	
Data-based inquiry and accountability	.45***	.23**	.64***	1.0

\* Note: District Ns for correlations range from 51 to 56 due to missing values for some scales (a score was computed only if responses for all component items were available). See Appendix B for scale definitions and their alpha coefficients.

\*\*  $p \leq .05 > .01$

\*\*\*  $p \leq .01$

## APPENDIX D

### District Demographics and Reform Indicators<sup>1</sup>: Case Study Sites and Bay Area Norms

	DISTRICT			BAY AREA DISTRICTS <sup>2</sup>
	Highland	East Bay	San Diego	Mean (standard deviation)
<b>DISTRICT SIZE AND DEMOGRAPHICS<sup>3</sup></b>				
Size (schools)	13	11	190	13
% students eligible for Free/Reduced meals)	35%	20%	65%	23%
% Black students	5%	5%	15%	7%
% English learner/students	25%	15%	30%	16%
<b>DISTRICT REFORM INDICATOR</b>				
Central office learning organization	4.7 **	4.0	4.3	4.0 (.7)
Coherent focus in teaching and learning	5.0 *	4.6	4.7 *	4.2 (.9)
Instructional support	5.0 **	4.3	4.3	4.2 (.6)
Data-based inquiry and accountability	3.0	3.3 *	2.9	3.0 (.6)

\* District mean is  $\geq .5 < 1$  standard deviation above the Bay Area district mean.

\*\* District mean is  $\geq 1$  standard deviation above the Bay Area district mean.

<sup>1</sup> Survey scale scores reported here are means of administrator ratings for items included in each scale (see Appendix B for scale definitions). Ratings were provided by the Assistant Superintendent/Director of Curriculum and Instruction for each district. Each of the districts stands out on at least one of the district reform indicators; Highland is most advanced in its reform practices.

<sup>2</sup> Regional norms are based on survey data for 58 of the 115 districts in the six-county Bay Area; responding districts over-represent those participating in the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative.

<sup>3</sup> Student demographic data for cases are rounded to the nearest 5%.



## CTP Research Reports

---

The Center's Research Report series presents the findings of CTP studies, analyses, reviews, and conceptual work. In addition to internal review by Center members, each report has been reviewed externally by at least two scholars and revised in light of the reviewers' comments and suggestions. Along with CTP Working Papers, Policy Briefs, and Occasional Papers, these reports are available for download from the Center's website: [www.ctpweb.org](http://www.ctpweb.org)

## Center Affiliates

---

American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education  
American Federation of Teachers  
Council for Chief State School Officers  
National Alliance of Business  
National Association of Secondary School Principals  
National Board for Professional Teaching Standards  
National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education  
National Council of Teachers of English  
National Education Association  
National School Boards Association  
National Staff Development Council  
National Urban League

American Association of School Administrators  
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development  
International Reading Association  
National Association of Elementary School Principals  
National Association of State Boards of Education  
National Conference of State Legislatures  
National Council for the Social Studies  
National Council of Teachers of Mathematics  
National Governors' Association  
National Science Teachers Association  
National Urban Coalition  
Teachers Union Reform Network

## Center Team

---

Principal Investigators and Co-Principal Investigators

### UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

Michael Knapp, Center Director  
James Banks  
Margaret Plecki  
Sheila Valencia

### STANFORD UNIVERSITY

Linda Darling-Hammond  
Pamela Grossman  
Milbrey McLaughlin  
Joan Talbert  
Sam Wineburg

### UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Deborah Loewenberg Ball  
David Cohen  
Edward Silver

### UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Thomas Corcoran  
Richard Ingersoll

### Researchers at Other Institutions

Barnett Berry, University of North Carolina  
Robert Floden, Michigan State University  
David Monk, Pennsylvania State University  
Jon Snyder, Bank Street College  
Judy Swanson, Research for Quality Schools  
Suzanne Wilson, Michigan State University

## Contact Information

### Michael S. Knapp, Center Director

Miller Hall M201, College of Education  
University of Washington, Box 353600  
Seattle, WA 98195-3600  
email: [mknapp@u.washington.edu](mailto:mknapp@u.washington.edu)

### Michele C. Ferguson, Center Manager

Miller Hall 203C, College of Education  
University of Washington, Box 353600  
Seattle, WA 98195-3600  
Phone: (206) 221-4114  
FAX: (206) 616-8158  
email: [ctpmail@u.washington.edu](mailto:ctpmail@u.washington.edu)

### Sally Brown, Communications Director

Miller Hall 203D, College of Education  
University of Washington, Box 353600  
Seattle, WA 98195-3600  
Phone: (206) 543-5319  
FAX: (206) 616-8158  
email: [salbrown@u.washington.edu](mailto:salbrown@u.washington.edu)

### Web Address

<http://www.ctpweb.org>

