



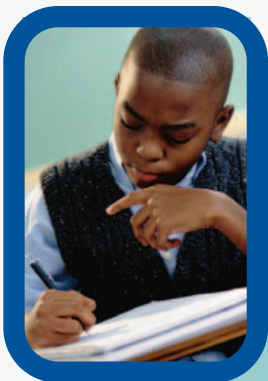
Center for the Study of
Teaching and Policy

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DISTRICT-LEVEL LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING:

How School District Central Office Administrators Participate
in Strengthening Learning Opportunities for All Students

Drs. Michael A. Copland & Meredith I. Honig, Principal Investigators



Who we are and how the study is supported

With support from The Wallace Foundation, a team of researchers from the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy at the University of Washington is undertaking an investigation of leadership in districts and state systems that seek to improve both learning and leadership in schools and classrooms.

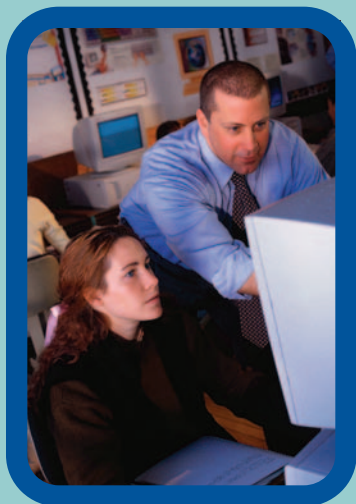


What this study is about

Across the country, a growing number of district central offices have launched efforts to rethink and strengthen how district central office administrators operate, in ways that promise to help advance teaching and learning improvement goals—what we call district-level leadership for learning. These districts are in largely uncharted territory; prescriptions abound, but the field is limited by a lack of empirical evidence about how various central office reforms actually impact practice. Such efforts are relatively new, leaving central office administrators with few models of how to do it and how to do it well. Research for decades has highlighted how district central office administrators fail to participate in, or even hinder, efforts to strengthen teaching and learning. This past experience suggests that central office transformation may be fundamental to strengthening teaching and learning districtwide.

The time is ripe to examine district-level leadership for learning, and the specific transformations at the central office level that might realize this goal. A number of districts have thrown high-level political support and dedicated funding behind these efforts to degrees that bode well for their success. This study investigates:

- Who is participating in these transformation efforts?
- What do the efforts entail?
- What conditions help or hinder them?
- What outcomes are associated with such efforts?



Expected contributions

This study will provide participating districts with opportunities for deep documentation and analyses of their efforts typically in short supply when it comes to district central office policy and practice. In addition, the study will provide these districts with opportunities for interim feedback and consultation on their work. The four case studies and accompanying cross-case analysis will provide models of what district-level leadership for learning involves and how external providers, funders, policymakers, and district leaders themselves can help create conditions that foster such leadership. This project will deepen knowledge of leadership, policy, bureaucratic change, and urban school districts and chart new directions for research into how to improve the performance of public bureaucracies.

What this study involves

We address these questions with in-depth analyses of central office transformation efforts in four mid- to large-sized urban districts where conditions seem promising for substantially rethinking and revamping central office support for improved teaching and learning. Working in partnership with these districts, the study team will document, analyze, and seek to understand what central office transformation in support of teaching and learning may involve and the conditions that seem to enhance such efforts. This comparative case study design frames data collection and analysis with theories of learning in social settings, thereby construing the challenge as one of transforming school district central office bureaucracies from largely top-down regulatory agencies to dynamic learning organizations.

Within each study site, we will be gathering information of several kinds; across an 18-month period (from early in 2007 through June, 2008), we will:

- Conduct retrospective and real-time interviews with central office administrators, school board members, school leaders, and external support providers.
- Observe central office administrators' practice, both at district level and in the interface between central office, external support providers, and schools.
- Review local archival sources that indicate how central office staff are deployed and what they are responsible for.
- Conduct a survey-based network analysis to understand changing roles and relationships within and beyond the central office.

The study will track these matters over a year and half through repeated visits to sites. However, the team will try to understand these matters retrospectively across a longer timeframe.

For Further Information

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Companion Studies

This investigation is closely linked to two other studies which address related aspects of learning-focused leadership and leadership support:

• **School Leadership Roles for Learning Improvement: How Schools Reconfigure, Assess, and Support Learning-focused Leadership Roles**

Principal Investigators:
Dr. Bradley S. Portin
Dr. Michael S. Knapp

• **Rethinking the Allocation and Development of Staffing Resources to Support Learning Improvement and Learning-focused Leadership**

Principal Investigators:
Dr. Margaret L. Plecki
Dr. Michael S. Knapp

Related Research

Additional information may be obtained in the following reports, which are available on the CTP website:

Leading, Learning, and Leadership Support

Michael S. Knapp, Michael A. Copland,
Margaret L. Plecki, Bradley S. Portin,
& Colleagues

Data-Informed Leadership in Education

Michael S. Knapp, Julie A. Swinnerton,
Michael A. Copland, & Jack Monpas-Huber

Redefining and Improving School District Governance

Margaret L. Plecki, Julie McCleery, &
Michael S. Knapp