

About the Authors

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In a workshop for principals and school leadership teams recently, we presented a framework for schools to improve performance for all students. During the debriefing, a principal said, “I understand why you want us to have clear performance goals and an instructional focus to drive our work, collaborate, align resources, engage our parents, and establish an internal accountability system. If it’s so important for us to do these things, why shouldn’t our central office departments do the same? It feels like we are trying to improve student performance in spite of the system, rather than with its support. With everything central office demands of me, I don’t have any time to focus on improving teaching and learning.”

This is a familiar refrain. The missing ingredient in the national debate about helping all children be successful learners is the role of central office. In our ten years of work with schools to improve performance we have found that it is essential to work in parallel with central office departments to improve their performance. Presented below is the five-step process we have developed with our collaborating districts. Although it plays out differently in each district, these five steps are always involved.

Step 1 - Understand the Impact of Our Work

In most districts we begin our work with central office departments by engaging them in collaborative workshops and conversations to explore what the research says schools need to be doing to improve performance, how all central office departments can help schools improve performance, and the key elements for leading sustainable improvement. This leads central office staff to a clear understanding of the powerful impact of their work to either accelerate or impede improvement.

Step 2 - Assess Where We Are

Three questions guide the next step in the process

- To what degree does the district culture support transformation and improvement at all levels and in all areas?
We ask districts to examine whether initiative and continuous improvement is valued for bus drivers, custodians and secretaries as well as for teachers, principals, and district administrators.
- To what extent does central office have the will and capacity for leading improvement?
We ask the central office leadership to examine key principles in the literature about leading sustainable change efforts and assess the strength of these principles in their district. We often use articles from business leadership to help identify key points.
- Which programs, policies, and "standard operating procedures" support - and which hinder - schools improving student performance and principals being effective instructional leaders?

We ask key stakeholders - central office staff, school board members, union leaders, principals, and school leadership teams - to examine critically areas directly related to teaching and learning, such as curriculum, professional development, and budgeting, and other areas, such as accounting and building maintenance that impact schools and may drain time and energy. We have developed a set of indicators for use in the assessment process. These indicators are tailored to each school system.

In some districts the superintendent invited a Focus on Results team to start the assessment process by preparing a systems audit report highlighting strengths and challenges around these three questions. In other districts, our team worked with district leadership to design surveys and/or workshops to engage key stakeholders in the three questions.

Often, these assessments reveal school districts in which central office departments operate as separate fiefdoms with little or no coordination among departments or in their interactions with schools for information or action. Rarely are schools and their staff, students, and parents seen as customers to be served. Many policies and procedures have been developed over decades and reflect a factory model of schooling with limited opportunities for collaborative work among staff and expect principals to be managers, not instructional leaders.

Once the assessment process is completed, we engage central office staff and other key stakeholder groups in workshops to discuss and validate the findings and to decide which areas offer the greatest opportunity for immediate improvement.

Step 3 - Develop a Vision and Set Targets

Creating a clear vision for central office improvements and explicit performance targets is the next step. District leadership is critical for communicating the vision, the importance of setting performance targets, and the expectation that “business as usual” is unacceptable.

In Edmonton, Alberta, the superintendent changed the name of the district office to Central Services, flattened the hierarchy, shifted more of the budget to schools, and told central office departments to refocus their work to become more customer-service oriented. After several years and despite the shift to site-based management, student achievement had stagnated.

Determined to raise student performance to higher levels, Edmonton has created a district-wide focus on achieving “superb results from all students” and has defined the “work” of the district as the “actions teachers and principals take to ensure superb results from all students and the actions taken by all other staff to ensure support for the achievement of these superb results.”

Each department within central services defines how it supports the focus and develops at least two performance targets regarding improving service and support to schools. One is around an external measure, such as the annual District Satisfaction Survey; and one is around a local measure, such as response time on work orders. Results are easily available and publicly posted. The data is part of an internal accountability system used for decision-making and continuous improvement.

For example, the Personnel Services department’s focus statement is:

“To achieve Superb Results from All Students, our focus is personnel service that supports and respects all staff and their work” and two of its performance targets are “98% of principals will be satisfied or very satisfied with the services provided to them by Personnel Services as noted on the annual District Satisfaction Survey” and “New applications (teacher and business) received will be screened by staffing consultants within 10 working days of receipt to Personnel, excluding holiday periods and peak staffing periods (May-September). Goal will be measured weekly to assess success rate.”

In Yakima, Washington, the Business Department set specific goals for each unit. Transportation included a goal to connect their work with the district-wide literacy initiative. This led to placing boxes of books on each bus so students could make good use of time while on the buses, as well as re-designing their bus safety presentations around characters from popular children’s stories.

Step 4 - Plan and Implement Improvements

Just as schools develop and implement annual school improvement plans, central office departments are expected to develop and implement annual improvement plans.

In our collaborating districts, each central office department evaluates its operations and culture in terms of a set of performance expectations related to supporting the district focus through its

- Words, actions, deeds
- Collaboration with schools and other central units
- Alignment of its resources – time, people, and dollars – to support the district focus
- Performance targets and system to monitor progress, share results, and plan for improvements.

Then each department establishes priorities and develops an annual performance improvement plan.

Some examples of the kinds of improvements departments have implemented include:

- Completely revised the annual school improvement planning and budgeting process so that each school’s plan and budget support and are aligned with the school’s instructional focus.
- Compiled a chronological list of all the requests made by any department to principals and schools for information and action and cut the list by 25%.
- Organized workshops for all central office staff on the improving student performance initiative and the implications of this initiative for their own work.
- Provided professional development for Central Services and school staff in accessing, analyzing, and interpreting student achievement results on the external assessments.
- Shifted the focus of professional development offerings from the usual smorgasbord to improving teaching and learning with follow-up coaching and support tailored to each school’s specific needs.
- Created a series of vignettes of school and central office success stories.
- Created a separate web site for the reform initiative and disseminated information to parents and the community.
- Streamlined the teacher application process to reduce the burden on principals from unsolicited requests and prepared interview guides for principals.
- Reorganized custodial services and facilities management to define performance standards, streamline operations, reframe the role of custodians, and reduce the amount of time required of principals.
- Developed a user-friendly web-based system for schools to use to purchase supplies and materials.
- Implemented a consistent system of reporting student performance data on local measures at set times during the year.
- Connected hiring and promotion decisions to progress on improvement initiative goals.
- Revised the administrator evaluation process and forms to reflect the improvement initiative goals.

Step 5 - Monitor and Adjust

Transforming central offices is a multi-year process. Plans must be monitored frequently and adjusted as needed. Each year, central office departments, individually and collectively, need to assess progress on their performance targets, examine new data, and refine and update their improvement plans. Often we find this requires periodic coaching visits from the external consultant over several years, as new practices and procedures become integrated into the culture and standard of practice. Senior Administration study sessions and retreats become opportunities to organize and analyze data from multiple perspectives and to guide and adjust the improvement initiative.

Lessons Learned

1. Up-front central office action increases school staff buy-in to the changes they need to make and reduces cynicism

Many staff members in schools are cynical about change from bitter experience with past efforts. Asking schools to transform and improve while central office departments continue with “business as usual” undermines institutionalizing changes. Districts that start changing the way central office departments work while working with schools visibly demonstrate that focus, alignment, and customer-service are important for everyone and that they are “walking the talk.”

In one district, the superintendent announced a set of improvements in services to schools the central office departments would be making over the following three months as part of the district’s focus on improvement. This announcement was timed to coincide with school leadership teams being introduced to the focus; the message being sent was clearly, “You are not alone – we are all in this together and we will be here to help.”

2. Success is contagious, but so is failure

Creating, sharing and celebrating small improvements build enthusiasm and momentum for tackling more difficult issues. One barrier to transforming central offices is the isolation among departments. Another is the contagious negativism and cynicism, “we tried that before and it didn’t work” or “we can’t do that because...”

The central office leadership team needs to organize regular opportunities for staff from all departments to get together, display progress on annual performance targets, and share successes. Vignettes on central office success stories are shared with schools and the community.

3. **Improving central offices takes time, energy, and commitment**

Transforming central offices cannot be the sole responsibility of outside consultants. At Focus on Results, we guide, mentor, train, and support, but ultimately the district leadership team has to own the work, commit the time and energy, and ensure that the work continues through transitions in leadership. Often, this means building and maintaining support from the school board and ensuring that any new superintendent understands the value of continuing the work.

4. **Business leaders can help us understand about leading change**

Business and education can be very different, but we have found that educators do connect with sound principles from business leadership. In the 1990's, John P. Kotter at the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration studied more than 100 companies undertaking major transformation efforts. Most of these efforts ended in failure. Many educators have found that the lessons learned from these companies are as important for their school systems as they are for the private sector.

5. **Communication is Key**

Open, transparent, two-way communication undergirds all of this work and is essential to sustaining improvement efforts in central office departments and schools. "But I sent out a memo" or "I said it once already" are not acceptable. Central offices need to develop communication plans to convey a sense of urgency, promote the district vision for improvement, understand the needs of their customers, and share successes.

6. **It is possible to create supportive, responsive central offices**

In both large and small districts, we have seen significant improvements in instructional practice and student performance within two years when leadership at all levels was committed to success. Since the whole system is working toward the support of effective instruction, district-wide practices and policies have changed along with site practices, greatly increasing the likelihood of having those gains last over time.

There are numerous challenges to addressing whole systems rather than individual schools, yet the effort seems worth the effects. One critical factor is the engagement of the superintendent. The day-to-day work of many superintendents is often removed from effective instructional practice and the type of leadership that supports it. However, when superintendents actively support and participate in a district-wide initiative to promote quality instruction and instructional leadership amazing things happen. Superintendents can be fully engaged in significant transformation and still keep their jobs. Results in student learning counts heavily with many school boards, outweighing complaints about the difficulty of change that come from district staff.

Central offices pose a challenge to systemic reform because they often require restructuring or retraining to become support systems and to work more collaboratively – with each other as well as with the schools. Central office departments need time and support to change attitudes and practices and reduce isolation.

Another challenge is that each school and department in a district is a unique culture and is at a different place in the journey to effectiveness. Training must be sufficiently differentiated to allow for recognition of each school and department's strengths and yet challenge each to move forward in other areas. We use a coaching component to support this differentiation. In districts using our framework, each principal and many central office leaders have a coach that meets with him or her on a regular basis to reflect together on how the work is being implemented. Following our structured Results-Based Coaching model, this individualized coaching allows each participant to progress at their own rate, but with built-in accountability and support for the implementation process.

Despite the challenges, we have found that whole district improvement is in some ways easier and certainly more efficient in achieving the gains desired and having them sustained over time. Given the scope of need in most urban settings across our country, it is essential to look more broadly than one school at a time and to focus on deep system-wide improvements. From our perspective, this may just be the missing ingredient in NCLB. ■