



From Tinkering to Transformation: Strengthening School District Central Office Performance

By Meredith I. Honig

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 largely mandated that US school district central office leadership should help schools dramatically improve their performance and significantly shrink decades-old achievement gaps. However, central offices have traditionally focused on business and compliance functions rather than on supporting schools in their efforts to help all students realize ambitious learning goals. To address this mismatch between new performance demands and long-standing central office work and capacity, district leaders must set aside old ways of working and fundamentally transform their central offices. The experience of districts pioneering such efforts suggests that central office transformation should involve creating partnerships between principals and executive-level central office staff, developing and aligning performance-oriented central office services to support district-wide instructional improvement, and establishing superintendent and other central office leadership that will help staff build their capacity for better performance.

Federal and state policies place challenging demands on US school district central offices—the local governmental bureaucracy that sits hierarchically above schools—to realize ambitious achievement goals, but these policies seem designed for failure. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), for example, largely mandated that districts help schools dramatically improve their performance and significantly shrink decades-old achievement gaps. This emphasis on central offices reflects reams of research and experience that show that without central office leadership, reform efforts lumber or fail at single schools and at scale across districts.¹

But such policies hardly attend to the mismatch between new performance demands and traditional central office work and capacity. Central offices have generally focused on business and compliance functions and, to a limited extent,

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Key points in this Outlook:

- US school district central offices can lead for better school performance, but the current work practices and capacities of central office staff are generally ill-equipped for supporting better student outcomes.
- District central offices must tackle the mismatch between new school performance demands and traditional central office work and capacity.
- The experience of pioneering districts suggests that transformation should involve creating intensive partnerships between principals and executive-level central office staff, developing and aligning performance-oriented central office services to support district-wide instructional improvement, and establishing superintendent and other central office leadership that will help staff continuously build their capacity for better performance.

curriculum adoption and development activities. The central offices have not focused on supporting schools in helping all students realize ambitious learning goals. In part because of this mismatch, the percentage of schools not realizing adequate yearly progress has been on the rise.

State and district policies and reforms targeted at turning around such results are right to invest in central offices. But such strategies generally tinker with surface changes and do not attend to the heart of the problem: the work practices and capacity of central office staff are ill-suited for supporting better student outcomes. Unless educational leaders tackle this mismatch head on, they will continue to expect the near-impossible from school district central offices and realize disappointing results. Districts that have been tackling this mismatch reveal initial promising directions for what a transformed central office looks like—one that operates as a support system for improving the quality of teaching and learning district wide.

Where We Are

Since the mid-1990s, school district central offices have faced increasingly challenging and high-stakes demands to help all their schools and students realize ambitious improvement goals. In 1994, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act extended an effort by state governors in the 1980s in calling for bold improvements in school performance by the year 2000. School district central offices became responsible for the development and implementation of a district-wide plan for helping all schools meet or exceed the standards. The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 provided funding for schools to help realize such goals.

Whereas past federal and state policies called on schools to help students reach basic minimum standards, the new initiatives required schools to help all students reach high learning standards. And while for decades, federal and state governments skipped over district central offices and channeled resources and attention to schools with these new initiatives, with the Goals 2000 act, federal and state leaders ushered in a new era of requiring that central offices play more fundamental roles in helping schools achieve ambitious results.

NCLB amplified these demands by imposing progressively greater consequences for schools' failure to improve. Many of these consequences fell directly on schools, but some consequences—including the possibility of funding cuts and other sanctions such as district takeover by states—significantly affected central offices.

While much of NCLB has been hotly debated, its relative emphasis on central offices made good sense. Evidence shows that school reforms tend not to take root at single schools or achieve district-wide improvements when district central offices do not participate productively in those reforms' implementation.² For example, during the effective schools movement of the 1980s, features of effective schools were difficult to realize within single schools and across multiple schools when school district central offices did not support the kinds of principal leadership and school-level changes at the heart of that reform movement.³

In the 1990s, reforms to scale up promising whole-school reform models likewise ran into central office roadblocks that curbed implementation.⁴ More recently, the implementation of standards-based curricular reform initiatives has been impeded in part by central office administrators' limited understanding of and support for new teaching demands.⁵

These results suggest, albeit by negative example, that central office leadership could be important for scaling teaching and learning improvement. But despite new attention on central offices, such results are not materializing. By the year 2000, the National Education Goals Panel that monitored progress on the Goals 2000 act goals concluded that, while school readiness and achievement in mathematics and middle-school reading were showing some modest gains, none of the eight educational goals had been realized. In fact, the number of schools not making adequate yearly progress increased between 2001 and 2010. By 2011, almost half (48 percent) of all US schools fell into that category. While many factors contribute to such outcomes, these consistently dismal results suggest that district central offices have not helped schools meet high-level achievement goals.

This limited central office performance is hardly surprising. Central offices were set up at the turn of the 20th century not to address teaching and learning, but mainly to bring administrative order to schooling, and especially to help manage burgeoning public-school enrollments in growing metropolitan areas.⁶ From their inception, rural district central offices did similar regulatory work with the added challenge of raising tax revenue, often required as a condition for receiving state funding.⁷

For much of the 20th century, both urban and rural school district central offices continued to focus on a relatively limited set of business, regulatory, and fiscal functions, paying little attention to improving the quality of teaching and learning. For example, school district

central offices generally screened teaching candidates to ensure that they met basic qualifications to work in the school district rather than strategically recruiting high-quality teachers, or rigorously assessing their teaching quality, or holding them accountable for results.

As federal and state governments increased their education funding, they positioned district central offices as fiscal pass throughs for that funding and otherwise amplified central offices' noninstructional role. Accordingly, central offices generally did not develop work practices or capacity consistent with supporting schools in improving the quality of teaching and learning for all their students. The recent demands on central offices to perform in ways that realize meaningful gains in teaching and learning—absent substantial attention to central office work practices and improved capacity to address these demands—slam districts like a square peg in a round hole.

Strategies to leverage central offices for improved academic results seem limited or incomplete. This is because they tinker with central office tasks and staffing rather than engage central offices in deeper changes in their work practices and capacity that are necessary for improved teaching and learning district wide. For example, many superintendents now emphasize as the main thrust of their reform efforts that their central office staff should respond to schools' requests promptly. But if the actual work that staff are doing, at whatever speed or level of responsiveness, is not the right work, then schools are not likely to receive the support necessary to help them improve teaching and learning quality.

A staff person in a central office human resources (HR) unit reported to me that she always goes the extra mile to support her principals. She provided as one example how, after working hours, she drove across town to a school so that a principal could easily sign required paperwork. I asked: "How important is it that the principal sign off on that issue? If it is necessary, why does the signoff have to happen on paper as opposed to through an automated system? What work are you not doing for schools because you are spending over an hour helping track down one signature?"

In this and other HR units, we have found staff working hard to carry out many long-standing functions such as processing by hand teachers' requests to go on maternity leave. They typically do not, however, ask more fundamental questions about teachers' performance such as: What services and supports do principals and other school staff actually need from us to help them dramatically

improve the quality of classroom teaching? How can we automate or eliminate some of our current work to focus on the provision of those services?

An analysis of the New York City Department of Education's HR function similarly revealed that staff were engaged in myriad transactions such as processing leave requests that could be eliminated or automated; this can free staff up for other and likely more impactful work such as generating data about staff performance to aid in the strategic placement of teachers and principals or working with institutions of higher education to strengthen the preparation of teachers and principals (sometimes called the principal and teacher "pipeline").⁸

An enhanced, though significantly nontraditional, role for central offices may be essential for helping schools build their capacity to achieve the autonomy to realize improved results.

Other reform strategies aim to improve central offices by significantly downsizing or eliminating them, allowing schools to operate more autonomously. Such efforts ignore that successful schools rarely go it alone—schools rely on their central offices and other outside organizations for essential support. In a comprehensive review of research on education policy strategies that promise schools increased decision-making authority over key functions, Lydia R. Rainey and I found that while many such initiatives call for less central office involvement in the school in the name of greater autonomy, an enhanced, though significantly nontraditional, role for central offices may be essential for helping schools build their capacity to achieve the autonomy to realize improved results.⁹

Similarly, charter school leaders who have tried to create schools outside central bureaucracies have invariably formed their own central offices called Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) in an attempt to provide schools with such supports and realize economies of scale with some operations and instructional supports.¹⁰ But CMOs are not necessarily better supports for instructional improvement than are traditional central offices. Some charter school leaders express the same or worse dissatisfaction with their management organizations as public-school principals do with their central offices;

moreover, many charter school leaders report having less autonomy from their CMOs than do their regular public-school counterparts.¹¹ Such realities suggest that the question policymakers should be asking is not whether to have central offices, but how to have high-performing central offices.

Recently, some reformers have suggested that “portfolio management” provides a viable central office alternative.¹² Such strategies vary but typically involve shrinking central offices and focusing them on contracting out with external organizations to support schools in ways tailored to their needs and strengths. Cultivating external supports to enhance the menu of services the central office provides to schools could be part of the core work of a high-performing central office. Portfolio reformers’ willingness to look to high-performing private firms as models for public-sector reform seems potentially important for disrupting business-as-usual practices in central offices.

But the experience of districts pioneering portfolio management suggests that this reform strategy does not adequately specify what, beyond managing contracts, a high-performing central office does. Nor does the reform address the likely limited supply of external providers relative to schools’ demand for support.¹³ New York City’s ambitious portfolio management effort suggests that even in contexts that are relatively rich in external support providers, external organizations have the capacity to serve only a small fraction of city schools.

Where We Go From Here

My review in the previous section suggests that schools that work alone will not realize ambitious policy goals of improving the quality of instruction for all students. Central offices play vital roles in helping schools realize such results. However, too many central office reform proposals seem incomplete at best, tinkering at the margins of central offices and not grappling meaningfully with the extent to which central office work and capacity may not be aligned with such results. Instead, leaders must be willing to fundamentally rethink and remake their central offices so that they perform in ways that support schools in realizing instructional improvement goals. But what ideas should guide such efforts?

My colleagues and I set out to address this question with a rigorous analysis of three school systems whose leaders seemed to understand that just tinkering with their central offices would likely not improve the extent

to which those offices help schools build their capacity to improve teaching and learning. We called their efforts “central office transformation,” in part because these efforts involved leaders initiating a process of completely disbanding their long-standing central offices and erecting new performance-focused organizations that provide high-quality services to support school results.

Our study involved approximately 265 hours of observations of central office staff work, 283 interviews, and reviews of over 200 documents. We have further confirmed our findings about the work of performance-focused central offices in a follow-up research study involving six districts ranging from small to mid-sized, and through our efforts to assist over 40 districts in using our research findings to spark their own central office transformation initiatives.

We found that three core elements characterize central offices that are on track to perform in ways that help schools build their capacity for improved teaching and learning in every classroom:

- Intensive partnerships between executive-level central office staff and school principals that aim to help principals grow as instructional leaders and that elevate responsibility for supporting principal growth to a position in or only one or two levels beyond the superintendent’s office;
- Completely redesigning each central office function for performance. Such redesign involves each unit working with various data to identify a defined set of high-quality, relevant services for schools—those likely to help schools build their capacity for excellent teaching and learning. With the benefit of well-elaborated performance management systems, staff throughout the central office revisit and update their service menus continuously to increase the relevance and quality of services. In the process, the staff work in project management or problem-solving mode, across rather than within traditional central office silos; and
- Performance-oriented leadership on the part of the superintendent and others throughout the central office. Such leadership, like that in some high-performing private firms, involves leaders continuously teaching staff how to change in ways that support reform goals while those leaders strive to become smarter about the work themselves.¹⁴

Importantly, our conclusions dig beneath research findings that are common in other studies to reveal the work practices and capacity of staff that we associated with building schools' capacity for improving teaching and learning. For example, some researchers argue that central offices that realize improved results have performance management systems, but we have worked with many districts that have performance management systems but that have not realized improved results.¹⁵

We found it was not enough for districts to simply have performance management systems. The systems mattered when they generated data that staff saw as relevant to informing their daily work and when the systems helped staff use the data to actually improve. In the following three sections, I summarize some of these practices within the broad categories of intensive partnerships, a shift to services, and new leadership.

Intensive Partnerships between Central Offices and Principals. Transforming districts understand that they exist to help schools build their capacity for high-quality instruction in all classrooms and that their support of school principals' development as instructional leaders is essential to realizing those results. Such a focus reflects a growing body of research that reveals principals' key role in helping to improve the performance of their teachers.¹⁶

These roles for principals, sometimes called "instructional leadership" or "human capital manager" roles, involve principals serving as main agents in the strategic recruitment, selection, development, and retention of teachers. With this emphasis on principal leadership, transforming systems move beyond old education debates regarding whether reform should be top-down or bottom-up and pursue a wholly different alternative—a partnership relationship between the central office and schools aimed at supporting principals and holding them and their central office partners accountable for results.

With these partnerships, districts avoid the limitations of occasional part-time coaching by frontline staff or contractors. Instead, districts dedicate executive-level central office staff to supporting principals' development as instructional leaders. Such partnerships elevate the importance of principal instructional leadership by making support for such results the responsibility of staff who report directly to the superintendent or his or her chief officers. The location of this responsibility at the executive level also effectively shrinks the size of the central office for principals, increasing the potential for better communication between themselves and the

superintendent and increasing chances to focus executive-level decisions on principal support.

Not all central office partnerships help principals grow as instructional leaders. In those that do, central office staff dedicate ample time to intensive work with principals on their growth as instructional leaders. In mid-sized to large urban districts (those with at least 20 schools), staff have enough time when supporting principals' instructional leadership is the sole responsibility of executive-level staff, whom we call instructional leadership directors (ILDs). In smaller systems, we have seen superintendents and chief academic officers function effectively as ILDs themselves.

Many districts create such positions, but not all see principal growth. What makes the difference between partnerships that do and do not help principals develop as instructional leaders is how ILDs actually work with their principals. In mine and my colleagues' original research study and ongoing work, we have found sharp differences in the orientations and practices of ILDs that we associated with positive, negative, or negligible results.¹⁷

Low-impact ILDs tend to view and approach their work as principal supervision and evaluation. For example, one such ILD occasionally visited his or her assigned schools, checked on the quality of classroom teaching, and sent principals written summaries of what he or she saw and what the principal should do. High-impact ILDs understand their work as teaching and engage in specific practices typical of high-quality teachers in other settings.¹⁸

Another one of these ILDs also visited classrooms as part of his or her work. But he or she did so alongside principals, modeling for principals how to observe and ask questions in classrooms in ways that we associated with principals' engagement in progressively more challenging instructional leadership tasks. We consistently found that the specific practices of ILDs who create conditions supportive of principals' development as instructional leaders mirror those of high-impact teachers in other settings.¹⁹

Relevant, High-Quality, and Differentiated Central Office Services. Leaders in transforming systems realize that central offices engage in various functions that do not matter enough to the improvement of teaching and learning—even those leaders located within curriculum and instruction units. Our analysis of staff assignments in most central offices shows that staff tend to be assigned to manage particular funding streams or programs without much (if any) prior analysis of what staffing and work patterns might actually improve school performance.

For instance, in many districts, staff reported that they open every school year with an intensive workshop for all district teachers in a subject area such as math or reading. We then asked: "To what extent does offering that workshop actually help teachers teach better?" More often than not, staff admitted that they host such workshops because that is what the district has always done, rather than because doing so might actually improve results.

With their emphasis on principal leadership, transforming systems move beyond old education debates regarding whether reform should be top-down or bottom-up and pursue a wholly different alternative.

To break the cycle of business as usual, leaders in transforming systems adopt some basic practices of private firms including putting all their resources on the table, sometimes starting literally with a blank page and asking: What are the most essential services we can provide to schools that are likely to help school staff substantially improve the quality of classroom teaching? What is the lowest-end service that is worth offering because it may help some schools improve results and is otherwise worth the cost? What is the highest-end package of services we could afford to offer? What else can we do, including brokering services from other providers, to build a system of supports for schools based not on what we have always done or on what our current staff can do well, but on what our main customers, school principals, need? Leaders then build out staff teams and organize staff work to support the delivery and continuous monitoring of the quality of such services.

These efforts, like many portfolio management reforms, aim to provide schools with a menu of services from which they can choose an appropriate set to help address their particular needs and strengths. Unlike most portfolio management reforms that depend on the availability of such services outside the district, central office transformation strategies charge central office staff with ensuring that schools have access to high-quality services, including those services that central offices themselves provide and those they generate or broker among outside providers.

For example, in one district, the head of the instructional services unit engaged her staff in a comprehensive

planning process to scour research, district performance data, and the staff members' own experience to identify services they could provide that would be likely to improve teaching quality. They used that information to develop service packages that school principals, with support from the ILDs, could draw from to support the implementation of their school improvement strategies.

Like performance-oriented service menus in other sectors, the instructional services menu offered strategically tailored options for different users or customers. For example, a low-end service package in elementary mathematics involved occasional coaching for experienced teacher leaders in supporting the improvement of mathematics instruction school wide. A more intensive service package in the same area involved more coaching days to help principals build a team of teacher leaders who could then coach others within their school.

Similarly, transforming district leaders engage in a major overhaul of the HR function, again by starting not with business-as-usual but with a blank page, and asking themselves: What supports can our central office provide to schools so that, as a system, we are recruiting, selecting, developing, and retaining top talent in all positions? How can we work from data to fit teachers and principals to the right schools at the right times in ways that are likely to accelerate the improvement of teaching quality and student learning? Many leaders find that to realize such results, HR staff must let go of some old work and engage in fundamentally new work such as building pipeline relationships with colleges and universities so that they work together strategically to place and grow highly qualified staff.

Leaders of transforming systems scrutinize all central office functions in these ways and remain open to eliminating those that are not contributing to improved school performance. And they engage all staff in the challenging and meaningful processes of aligning their work to such results. For instance, in one system, staff in the facilities department were able to calculate the time they saved school principals by working more effectively in providing building and grounds maintenance services. The staff translated that savings into a dollar value, which they argued the system could reinvest in instructional supports.

To support the development of central offices into true performance-oriented service organizations, central office leaders develop performance management systems. In my work with districts across the country, I have found performance management systems proliferating in districts across the country and generating reams of data,

mainly about schools. In transforming districts, such systems also produce meaningful data about central office performance and help central office staff truly use the evidence to improve the relevance and quality of their work.

For example, in one district, the director of nutrition services had access to several years of data through the district's early performance management system, indicating that principals found her staff nonresponsive and their services low quality. Principals indicated that any time they asked nutrition staff to help them improve how they managed food services at their site, central office staff in that unit told principals that the nutrition staff could not help.

The director of nutrition services argued that her staff were responsible for the proper use of federal funds by schools, which almost invariably required that she deny schools' requests. The director believed that her unit was constrained by so many federal mandates that the district-wide reforms that focused on better services to schools did not apply to her or her staff. As the district built out its performance management system, leaders developed processes that helped ensure that the system did not simply generate data, but that it also influenced staff practice.

The chief of operations dedicated time to work with the nutrition services director to help her consider the implications of the data for how her staff worked. The director realized that federal mandates did dictate how schools spent federal dollars on food services, and that her staff still needed to help schools comply with those strict mandates and often say "no." But she came to understand that her staff would better serve schools if they responded with "no, but . . ." rather than simply "no," and otherwise from a strategic mindset—for example, helping staff strategize about other more flexible resources that they could access to expand the nutrition services they provided to students. As a result of these shifts, her principal satisfaction ratings significantly improved.

Leaders also build staff capacity for project management or bolster staff members' ability to bust out of their traditional silos and work in ways that solve problems across units. For example, in one district, leaders recognized that schools needed support with operational functions such as budgeting and other school-level management issues, but there was no existing central office unit to support schools with such tasks. As a result, this need of district schools went persistently unmet.

But once leaders began working in project management mode, they recognized the problem and created a

new team of staff called "operations support coaches," who provided a new line of services. Schools could access these services as needed to help them build better school-based operational systems.

Leadership As Teaching and Learning. Leaders in transforming systems engage in forms of leadership characteristic of those in high-performing private firms. These leaders continuously teach staff to build their capacity for the right work and continuously learn from the process to realize ongoing performance improvements. In doing so, these leaders are hands-on with staff, actively and directly cultivating staff leadership by encouraging all staff to take risks and innovate in service of better performance.²⁰ Such leadership is counter-cultural for some educational leaders who view their roles mainly as hands-off; as delivering and enforcing directives; and as largely focused outward on engaging with parents, board members, and other stakeholders.

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For example, one superintendent we have worked with realized that his regular meetings with his chief officers, sometimes called "cabinet meetings," involved announcement after announcement about policies and procedures and did not help his cabinet members lead for results. He threw out the old way of working and began to convene his cabinet more in the style of a performance-oriented project team. He first established learning goals for individual members and the group as a whole.

He then constructed series of meetings to help staff reimagine their own responsibilities as leaders of service teams charged with contributing to the improvement of instruction, and he held his cabinet members accountable for performance results. Now all his staff—from teachers to the central office—engage in evidence-based improvement processes, called "cycles of inquiry," which challenge them to work from performance data to interrogate and continuously improve their work.

In another system, a chief operations officer convened all staff (from clerical to professional) in a series of intensive development sessions to help them understand what it means to work as part of a service culture and to convey to them that truly serving schools involves not

only “service with a smile,” but also actually providing a higher-quality service. She then worked alongside staff at all levels to deepen their understanding of how their current ways of working compared with the system’s new performance expectations and to help them better align their work with what performance demands.

Such modes of leadership increase staff autonomy and support to help them lead for improved results. For instance, in one district, most principals knew that if they wanted to receive good support from the HR department, they should go to one particular HR analyst. However, for the decade during which that analyst worked in that capacity, no one ever asked her to share what she did that the principals found so useful, let alone what it would take to lead for such changes within HR.

As part of the transformation process, a district leader freed up her time to develop a model of a new way of working within her unit and supported the HR analyst in training other staff. The district leader simultaneously promoted the analyst within the central hierarchy and transitioned others, demonstrating that in the new system, staff would be rewarded for performance, not tenure.

Executive leaders in transforming systems are skilled at change management. They work with staff to build out a collective vision of a high-performing central office to guide efforts over the long term, identify specific work streams in every central office unit with clear benchmarks for success, and foster executive-level sponsorship of and accountability for the work. For instance, leaders in one district broke out of the routine, five-year strategic planning process required by their school board. They argued that such plans typically amounted to compliance documents used by the school board because, in the words of one leader, school boards “require strategic plans. They do it because that’s what they do. We [in the central office] get through it.”

Instead, district leaders developed principles to guide their central office transformation process and developed work streams consistent with those principles. Each work stream planning document included a project overview describing the problem that the work stream aimed to address to help staff understand the rationale for the work, achieved and attempted benchmarks, products completed, and lessons learned. Staff actively used these descriptions to guide their work. The strongest of such plans do not simply lay out work streams, but also demonstrate how the work streams are individually and collectively likely to contribute to improved results. These plans are sometimes called “theories of action”

because they show how different action steps fit together in a logical trajectory to improved results.

Conclusions and Implications

The time has come to stop tinkering with central offices and begin more fundamentally transforming their core work so that they realize the performance demands of supporting high-quality teaching and learning at scale. Pioneering districts’ efforts provide some initial anchors from which districts of all sizes can design their own strategies. These strategies start with innovating central office leaders’ willingness to set aside central office business-as-usual behavior and to reimagine a system of support for schools that is oriented toward results. These strategies draw from private-sector change management tactics and adapt them to central office settings.

Federal and state policymakers as well as philanthropic foundations can support such work in several ways. For one, these funders can move beyond simple rewards and penalties for district performance to more deeply incentivize and guide central office leaders’ engagement in transforming their central offices for better performance. Such investments could include designing requests for proposal processes that lead district teams through planning for deep performance improvements.

Such processes, like change management initiatives in other sectors, could engage districts in a “clean sheet” redesign process, starting not with current operations and staffing but with meaningful performance targets and asking: What services should we provide to schools to help them realize those performance targets? How can we staff up those services—with some new staff and also newly trained staff—to ensure that we meet those targets?

At the same time, policymakers should ensure that their strategies for driving improved central office performance free district leaders up to lead for performance. For instance, in their enthusiasm to improve performance, some funders have layered onto districts multiple compliance checks that, while focused on performance measures, ironically take district time and attention away from the deeper work involved in actually improving their performance. Instead, policymakers should be pursuing strategies that responsibly relieve districts of unnecessary regulations and other rules that curb performance-driven innovations in the central office.

The removal of constraints regarding central office and school staffing is especially important in transforming systems. As my earlier discussion suggests, leaders of

transforming central offices take a hard look at their staff and ask how they can bring in new personnel and significantly build the capacity of existing staff to improve performance. Throughout the process, leaders must have the flexibility to promote staff based on performance, rather than, for example, based on tenure. District leaders need new regulatory structures, including relationships with unions and school boards that ensure proper use of public funds and employee protections, but in ways that do not limit their ability to staff for performance.

To realize such results, federal and state policymakers could work closely with district leaders to identify and remove specific regulations that curb district performance. However, such tinkering with regulatory frameworks as a main strategy for enabling central office transformation seems out of step with the fundamental changes transformation involves. Some district leaders that my colleagues and I spoke with said that they wondered whether they could be successful with such transformative work in contexts where school boards and unions are operating in ways focused on compliance at the expense of performance. Federal and state policymakers might help accelerate change by promoting wholly new models of school board governance and union participation in reforms that help districts focus on realizing the results of high-quality teaching and learning for all students.

To succeed at this work, district leaders also need knowledge about the work practices of high-performing central offices and opportunities to build their leadership capacity. Policymakers can support such knowledge generation and access by investing intentionally in research and development activities in this arena, including those that help district leaders understand and meaningfully engage with such ideas, as opposed to strategies that simply disseminate information.

A national, federally funded research and development center focused on central office leadership could serve as an important focal point for such efforts. Such a center would identify and disseminate models of central offices that lead for performance. As the experience of our pioneering districts demonstrates, such ideas would come not only from traditional central offices, but also from other sectors. Given the complexity of central office transformation, such a research and development center would involve research as well as the development of resources to help central office leaders engage in this work. Such resources would include new designs for central office leadership and teams of experts who can work on site to support the work.²¹

Ultimately, central office transformation does not happen absent new kinds of leadership—leadership that sets a vision for ambitious, performance-orientated change that moves beyond tinkering to realize true transformation. Policymakers can fuel such efforts by scrutinizing current pipelines into superintendency and other central office leadership roles and by investing in systems-level leadership preparation experiences that equip leaders for such challenging work. Based on the experience of existing alternative pathways into teaching and principalship, such new leaders for new systems will likely come from both traditional, university-based preparation programs—especially those with close, active partnerships with school districts—and nontraditional routes.

Notes

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