

## **The New Middle Management: Intermediary Organizations in Education Policy Implementation**

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*Intermediary organizations have become increasingly prominent participants in education policy implementation despite limited knowledge about their distinctive functions and the conditions that constrain and enable those functions. This article addresses that research-practice gap by drawing on theories of organizational ecology and findings from a comparative case study of four intermediary organizations that helped with collaborative policy implementation in Oakland, California. I define intermediaries as organizations that operate between policymakers and implementers to affect changes in roles and practices for both parties and show that such organizations typically vary along at least five dimensions. Oakland's intermediary organizations all provided new implementation resources—knowledge, political/social ties, and an administrative infrastructure—but faced different constraining and enabling conditions. Using insights from this strategic case study, this article begins to build theory about intermediary organizations as important participants in contemporary policy implementation.*

*Keywords: capacity, district central office, implementation, intermediary organization, Oakland, school-community partnerships*

SCHOOL DISTRICT central office administrators, school principals, and other education leaders face contemporary policy demands that exceed their traditional capacity for action and, increasingly, they call on “intermediary organizations” to help with implementation. For example, professional development organizations coach classroom teachers in meeting ambitious content and performance standards and assist central office administrators in providing such coaching themselves (Stein & Brown, 1997; Wechsler & Friedrich, 1997). “Design teams” help schools implement comprehensive school reform models and support central offices in developing curriculum and other implementation supports (Bodilly, 1998).

Despite their growing number, research and experience teach little about intermediary organizations. These organizations have appeared in the background of implementation studies rather than as the main research focus. Studies and policy documents occasionally refer to individual intermediary organizations without explaining what makes an organization an intermediary. Likewise, various organizations self-identify as intermediary organizations without qualification and often add the designation “intermediary” to a repertoire of other identifiers such as professional development organization, school coach, technical assistance provider, and contractor. These trends make it difficult to discern what intermediary organizations are, what they do, and how they operate. Accord-

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ingly, research, policy, and practice provide weak guides for what may be productive and appropriate roles for this increasingly prominent participant in education policy implementation.

This article aims to address this knowledge gap by answering three questions: (a) What defines intermediary organizations as a distinct organizational population? (b) What functions do intermediary organizations serve in education policy implementation? (c) What conditions constrain/enable intermediary organizations in carrying out their functions?

Using a brief review of the literature on intermediary organizations and organizational ecology, I define intermediaries as organizations that operate between policymakers and policy implementers to enable changes in roles and practices for *both* parties. I highlight that organizations that fit this definition vary by at least five dimensions: the levels of government (or types of organizations) between which they mediate, their membership, their geographic location, the scope of their work, and their funding/revenue sources. I then present findings from a comparative, qualitative case study of four intermediary organizations in Oakland, California that were established to operate between district central office administrators (the policymakers) and leaders of school-community partnership sites (the implementers). I show that Oakland's intermediary organizations primarily provided new resources—knowledge, political/social ties, and an administrative infrastructure—necessary for implementation but traditionally unavailable from school district central offices or school-community partnerships and that they faced different constraining and enabling conditions in carrying out these functions. I conclude by drawing on the particulars of the Oakland case to suggest initial parameters for building theory about intermediary organizations in education policy implementation.

### **Intermediary Organizations as a Distinct Organizational Population**

Many have demonstrated that over at least the past 15 years district central offices and schools have faced demands that far exceed their traditional capacity for action. Such demands include pressures to create systems of standards and assessments (Smith & O'Day, 1990), to support classroom teachers in delivering complex forms of instruction (Spillane, 1996, 1998), to forge

school-community partnerships (Honig & Jehl, 2000), to engage citizens in reform (Marsh, 2000; Public Education Network, 2001), to implement whole school reform strategies (Bodilly, 1998; Datnow & Stringfield, 2000), to manage high-stakes testing (Finnigan & O'Day, 2003), to develop pools of highly qualified teachers, to decentralize authority (Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990), and to weather state and mayoral takeover (Kirst & Bulkley, 2000). Perhaps not surprisingly, then, district central office administrators and school leaders increasingly have relied on so-called intermediary organizations to help with various aspects of implementation.

Policy and advocacy groups have contributed much of the documentation of organizations that call themselves intermediaries in social policy arenas including education (e.g., Camino, 1998; Kronley & Handley, 2003; Wynn, 2000). However, such documentation typically does not provide a clear definition of intermediary organizations and takes for granted that organizations that self-identify as intermediaries fit this designation. Further muddying the definition, many self-identified intermediary organizations add the label, intermediary, on to a broad repertoire of other functions and identities. As a result, "intermediary organization" has come to refer to a motley collection of organizations otherwise known as technical assistance providers, vendors (Bodilly, 1998), collaboratives (Bodilly, 2001), capacity builders (Camino, 1998; Rodriguez & Pereira, 2000), community development coaches (Urban Strategies Council, 1996), universities (Harkavy & Puckett, 1991), resource and referral organizations (Pavetti, Derr, Anderson, Trippe, & Paschal, 2000), external support providers (Coburn, 2002; Finnigan & O'Day, 2003), professional development organizations (Burch, 2002; Wechsler & Friedrich, 1997), reform support organizations (Kronley & Handley, 2003), design teams (Bodilly, 1998), Public Education Funds (Public Education Network, 2001), regional reform organizations (McDonald, McLaughlin, & Corcoran, 2000), and corporate law firms (Suchman, 1995). Organizational categories are not always mutually exclusive. However, the assignment of such varied organizations to one group in the absence of an analytical definition blurs what may be distinctly intermediary about intermediary organizations. Particularly in light of their proliferation, an examination of intermediary organizations seems essential for helping

policymakers and others to decide whether and how to involve them in implementation and to hold them accountable for public funds.

Concepts from theories of organizational ecology help bring some order to this messy terrain by providing criteria for distinguishing among organizational populations. These criteria highlight that a definition should identify intermediary organizations' particular functions and the conditions that may enable or constrain them in performing their functions. To elaborate, theories of organizational ecology posit that organizational populations are collections of organizations that are "alike in some respect" but that do not necessarily interact with one another (Scott, 1992, 127). What it means for organizations to be alike has been the subject of some debate but scholars typically agree on two dimensions of likeness.

First organizations in a population have a similar "technical core"—a similar set of activities and competencies essential to an organization's production and survival (Hannan & Freeman, 1977; McKelvey, 1982). In other words, organizations in the same population perform comparable *functions* essential to their nature and their basic maintenance. Accordingly, some define organizational populations as occupying a distinct environmental niche (Hannan & Freeman, 1989). This definition means that if an organization otherwise known as a professional development organization also claims to operate as an intermediary organization, then observers should be able to distinguish its intermediary functions from its professional development functions. From an economic standpoint, the designation, intermediary organization, indicates an added value beyond what an organization could or would otherwise provide.

Second, the extent to which population members are able to perform their essential functions depends on a distinct set of factors such as structures, capacity, beliefs, meanings, and relationships specific to that population (Friedland & Alford, 1991; March & Olsen, 1989). This common dependence means that members rely on similar resources for support (Scott, 1992) and are vulnerable to more or less the same external pressures (some of which can result in organizational death) (Hannan & Freeman, 1989). In policy implementation terms, members of an organizational population face similar constraining and enabling conditions when it comes to their ability to perform their essential functions.

In contrast to the studies and documentation reports cited above, Berger and Neuhaus' research in the 1970s provides an important guide for an initial definition of intermediary organizations that fits the parameters outlined by population ecology. Berger and Neuhaus wrote about "mediating structures" which they defined as "those institutions standing between the individual and his private life and the large institutions of public life" (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977, 2). They found that these structures—families, neighborhoods, churches, and voluntary associations—performed distinct functions: they increased the social connectedness of individuals and service delivery systems within the then growing welfare sector and helped both individuals and systems to adapt and change. Using Berger and Neuhaus' research and organizational ecology as guides, I define intermediary organizations as distinct from other organizational populations as follows: *Intermediaries are organizations that occupy the space in between at least two other parties. Intermediary organizations primarily function to mediate or to manage change in both those parties. Intermediary organizations operate independently of these two parties and provide distinct value beyond what the parties alone would be able to develop or to amass by themselves. At the same time, intermediary organizations depend on those parties to perform their essential functions.*

This definition has enough analytical power to exclude many self-identified organizations from the category, intermediary organizations. For example, an organization that has a contract with a district central office to train schoolteachers but no role related to central office change might more appropriately be called a technical assistance provider, school coach, vendor or all of the above. Such an organization does not "intermediate" between schools and their central office to affect change for both parties. Organizational types that work across the country such as some New American Schools design teams and Local Education Funds may function as intermediary organizations in some locations but not others. Likewise, the federal government long has relied on third-party organizations such as commissions to bring new resources to bear on policy problems and to help depoliticize certain decisions (e.g., Salamon, 1981). These relatively familiar and well-documented organizations would not qualify unilaterally as intermediaries because many

have functioned expressly as surrogates for federal agencies in leveraging reform of other organizations rather than as levers for governmental reform as well. This definition does not suggest that intermediary organizations cannot perform other functions (i.e., that a professional development organization cannot also be an intermediary organization), but rather offers specific criteria to inform the application of the intermediary label.

I used this definition to revisit my review of documentation reports purportedly related to intermediary organizations such as those cited above. I found that organizations that fit this description varying along at least five dimensions that provide an initial typology of this organizational population. First, intermediaries operate between various levels of government. For example, an organization might mediate between state and local governments or between school districts and schools. Interestingly, most of the intermediary organizations identified in my review work between school district central offices and schools. Second, the composition of intermediary organizations varies. Some intermediary organizations, such as Public Education Funds, typically consist of dedicated staff that do not hold positions in other organizations while many intermediary organizations otherwise called collaboratives or partnerships derive their membership from staff of other organizations. Third, location varies. Some intermediaries such as the Annenberg-funded Bay Area School Reform Collaborative and the New American Schools school reform design teams tend to be housed physically outside the districts within which they work. I call these organizations "external intermediaries." Other intermediary organizations such as many collaboratives are based within the geographic areas in which they work and accordingly I call them "internal intermediary organizations." Fourth, related to the third dimension, the scope of intermediaries' work ranges. Some intermediary organizations work with large numbers of policymakers and implementers across multiple jurisdictions while others restrict their work within single jurisdictions. Fifth, intermediary organizations differ in terms of their funding sources. Some are funded exclusively by public or private sources, which, arguably makes them quasi public or private organizations, while others receive funding from both public and private sources.

While various literatures help elaborate a definition and an initial typology of intermediary organizations the following questions remain: What functions do intermediary organizations serve in contemporary education policy implementation? What conditions constrain and enable intermediary organizations in carrying out their functions?

### Methods

To address these questions, I used a qualitative case study design because it provides opportunities to describe, define, and analyze little understood phenomena such as intermediary organizations over time (Merton, 1987; Yin, 1989). Based on the theory-based definition presented above I developed a purposive sample of four intermediary organizations. As summarized in Table 1, these intermediary organizations operated between the school district central office and school-community partnership sites—formal collaborations between schools and other youth-serving organizations typically in schools' neighborhoods. They were internal, membership organizations, the scope of their work focused on policy implementation within a single school district, and they received public and private funding for their operations. This internal focus allowed me to compare intermediary organizations while holding various contextual factors constant. Although not generalizable to all intermediary organizations in all contexts, findings from such a design may generate insights and hypotheses to guide theory development (Hartley, 1994; Merton, 1987) and reveal patterns with such little deviation on a small scale that they could reasonably represent populations (Phillips & Burbules, 2000).

#### *Oakland's Intermediary Organizations as a Strategic Case*

These four intermediary organizations in Oakland Unified School District, a midsized urban district in northern California, provided a strategic case for building theory about intermediary organizations. First, early data collection suggested these organizations fit my theoretical definition of an intermediary organization. Intermediary members reported that each organization operated in between policymakers and implementers to leverage change in both those parties and depended on those two parties to define their essential functions. All the intermediary organizations had multi-year funding and, in three cases, several revenue streams

TABLE 1  
Oakland's Intermediary Organizations\*

		Intermediary Dimensions						
Central Office Member	Intermediary Organization (Policy Initiative)	Site Members	Other	Mediated between central office and sites?	Composition	Location	Scope of Work	Funding Source
Two Frontline Administrators	"Staff Group" (Healthy Start)	Representatives from 3-6 school-community partnership sites	County services agencies	Yes	Membership	Internal	Oakland	Public: Federal revenue; state grants Other: Non-profit agency funds
One Frontline Administrator	"Staff Group" (Village Centers)	Representatives from 3 school-community partnership sites	County services agencies City Manager's Office	Yes	Membership	Internal	Oakland	Public: Central office funds Other: Foundation and non-profit agency funds
Two Oakland School Board Members One Senior Central Office Administrator (Superintendent)	"Directors Group" (Oakland Child Health & Safety Initiative)	2 Representatives from community-based services organizations Parent Advocate Youth	County: services agencies and supervisors City: Attorney General's, Mayor's, and Vice Mayor's offices Oakland Children's Hospital	Yes	Membership	Internal	Oakland	Public: Redirected public agency resources Other: Foundation and non-profit agency funds
None	"Citizens Group" (Planning and Oversight Committee)	None	City Council/ Mayor appoint citizen members	Yes	Membership	Internal	Oakland	Public: City parcel tax

\*Institutional and individual membership changed over the course of each organization's life. The rosters in this chart indicated the roles most frequently represented in each organization between 1998 and 2000.

## *Data Collection*

which suggested that they might operate at least somewhat independently. Second, these intermediary organizations formed anew specifically to help with the implementation of four policy initiatives, which indicated they might reveal distinctly intermediary functions as opposed to organizations that performed multiple other functions. Third, because these organizations were internal, they promised opportunities for me to observe their frequent interactions with policymakers and implementers and to develop a rich descriptive dataset important to early stages of theory development.

Fourth, variations in intermediary membership offered potentially significant dimensions for inter-intermediary comparisons. For example, two of the organizations consisted almost entirely of school-community site directors and central office administrators—the two parties among which the intermediary organizations mediated. One organization primarily included directors of the school district, city, and county. Citizens representing the Mayor's Office and the city council comprised the fourth organization.

Importantly, Oakland's intermediary organizations participated in the implementation of a particular type of education policy—what I call “collaborative education policies” because they aimed to help schools to establish collaborative partnerships with other neighborhood-based youth-serving agencies (e.g., human services agencies and Boys and Girls Clubs) as a primary school improvement strategy. Collaborative education policies traditionally pose significant implementation challenges for school systems.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, these initiatives heightened the likelihood that schools and the district central office would look for implementation assistance and throw into relief intermediary organizations' distinctive functions in complex policy environments. Table 2 summarizes Healthy Start, the Oakland Child Health and Safety Initiative, the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth, and the Village Center Initiative. These initiatives vary along several dimensions elaborated elsewhere (Honig, 2001, 2003). What is important for this inquiry is that all four as designed promoted school-community partnerships, aimed to reform schools and the district central office to enable implementation, and left the nature of those reforms up to school and central office discretion. Initial funding sources varied but all aimed to leverage ongoing public and private investments in implementation.

Given the early stage of research on intermediary organizations, I did not seek to evaluate the success or failure of Oakland's intermediary organizations but to better define the nature and scope of their work with the hope that such research would help inform future evaluations. Accordingly, my data collection focused on intermediary organizations' functions and the conditions that impacted those functions; these processes served as my main outcome measures.

I drew primarily on direct, sustained observations and record data from intermediary meetings and in-depth interviews with intermediary participants (Barley, 1990). Between November 1998 and March 2000, I spent over 100 hours observing formal intermediary meetings and collected official minutes from meetings that predated the start of my data collection or that I otherwise did not attend. Altogether I accounted for almost 200 hours of intermediary meeting time. I also observed 55 hours of city council, school board, and Mayor's Education Commission meetings that concerned educational improvement. During all observations I typed almost verbatim transcripts of conversations.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with individuals affiliated with the intermediary organizations including past and present members and staff. Questions focused on respondents' day-to-day work, their capacity to participate in collaborative education policy implementation, and intermediary operations. I selected respondents who were most involved in intermediary operations based in part on their attendance at intermediary meetings. I interviewed 24 individual members at least once. To better understand the context in which intermediary organizations operated, I also interviewed nine individuals who did not have formal affiliations with intermediary organizations but who otherwise affected collaborative education policy implementation including school district central office administrators and county and city agency staff. I selected this group using a snowball sampling technique based on intermediary organization members' reports of individuals who had an impact on intermediary operations. In all, I conducted 42 interviews. Each lasted between 60 and 150 minutes. Most were audio taped and transcribed.

I augmented the observations and interviews with document reviews and informal conversa-

TABLE 2  
Oakland's Collaborative Education Policies

Policy Description	Oakland's Participation 1990–2000
<p><b>Healthy Start</b> Initiated in 1992 and administered by the California Department of Education, this program provided \$50,000 planning grants and \$400,000 three-year operational grants to school-community partnerships. Grantees created and implemented their own plans to strengthen youth development and learning through school-community collaboration. The state policy design emphasized school-linked case management services.</p>	16 schools or 18% of Oakland's public schools
<p><b>Oakland Fund for Children &amp; Youth</b> Initiated in 1996 by a successful popular ballot initiative to amend the Oakland City Charter, this policy required that Oakland set aside 2.5 percent of its city general fund for programs to strengthen youth development and learning. The estimated dollar value of the Fund at inception was \$5.7 million per year for 12 years.  Grantees (various youth serving agencies including schools) created and implemented their own improvement plans. School-community collaboration was strongly encouraged but not required.</p>	24 schools citywide or 26% of Oakland's public schools*
<p><b>Village Center Initiative</b> Initiated in 1998 with a multi-million dollar grant from the DeWitt-Wallace Readers Digest Fund Beacons Dissemination initiative, this program funded middle school-community partnerships in Oakland to create and implement their own plans to strengthen youth development and learning through school-community collaboration. The initiative design emphasized school-linked youth development programs and transforming schools into community centers.</p>	15 centers (proposed) including all Oakland middle schools
<p><b>Oakland Child Health &amp; Safety Initiative</b> Initiated with a multi-million dollar grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Urban Health Initiative, Oakland's participation in this initiative between 1998–2000 involved "systems change" at school district, city, and county levels to support Village Center implementation. (See Village Center Initiative above.) Policy design emphasized reform of the district central office and other public systems.</p>	15 centers (proposed) including all Oakland middle schools

*Note.* Measures of school involvement in the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth were only available for 2001–2002. Staff estimate that these figures have remained fairly consistent since 1997. These counts indicate programs provided on a school site not other school-linkages (e.g., recruiting from schools, collaborations with schools not involving the provision of programs in a school facility) and therefore comprise conservative estimates of school involvement.

tions. Documents included written reports and electronic copies of articles from local newspaper archives (reviewed between 1980 and 2000) that related to intermediary organizations and Oakland education more broadly. I used these documents to better understand intermediary organizations' functions and circumstances over time and the use of documentation in intermediary operations. I spent countless hours in informal conversations with intermediary members in between meetings about Oakland schools and intermediary organizations.

#### *Coding and Data Analysis*

I used NUD\*IST software to code the interview and observation transcripts and electronic record

data. Data coding was largely inductive and iterative since theory provided guides for identifying intermediary organizations (i.e., sampling) but not intermediary functions or constraining/enabling conditions (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). I coded data in three phases. First, as part of a broader study of collaborative policy implementation, I used concepts from organizational learning theory to define demands these policies placed on district central offices and school-community partnerships. In this phase, I separated data related specifically to intermediary organizations. (For a detailed description of this first phase, please see Honig, 2003.) Second, I coded the data regarding intermediary organizations using broad codes that required little interpretation including "reported

and observed intermediary functions” and “enabling and constraining conditions” related to those functions. Within the dataset on functions, I developed codes related to functions using constant comparative methods to distill patterns (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I excluded the functions that did not appear over the course of at least three of the four intermediary organizations’ operations. Third, I returned to the data related to conditions. I identified inductively and through constant comparison a set of broad categories related to these factors and main sources of their variation.

The design of this case study did not allow me to conclude how implementation would have proceeded in Oakland without intermediary organizations. To sharpen my view of intermediary organizations’ distinctive contributions, I compared data from 1990 through 1995, when only one of the four intermediary organizations operated with data from 1996 through 2000 when Oakland boasted four active intermediary organizations with their own budgets and political support. Also, in interviews I asked respondents to describe implementation opportunities and obstacles, to identify all their possible implementation resources, and to discuss when and why they called on intermediary organizations for assistance. These resource maps helped me pinpoint how respondents viewed intermediary organizations’ added value.

Oakland’s experience with intermediary organizations generated a dizzying array of organizational and professional names. To simplify my presentation of data and to reinforce salient aspects of my findings, I use the following terms in my report of findings.

- *Central office administrators:* Staff of the school district central office including: (a) Front-line central office administrators—Central office staff with primary responsibility for supporting school-community partnerships; these administrators had such titles as “Director of Village Centers.” (b) Senior central office administrators: Directors of the district central office with primary responsibility for the overall policy of the central office such as assistant superintendents and superintendents.

- *Sites:* Partnerships between schools and other youth-serving organizations designed locally by the participating school-level organizations that received implementation funding or other support from one of the four focal policies.

- *Site directors:* School principals, non-profit agency directors, and others formally responsible for developing and implementing individual school-community partnerships.

- *Intermediary conveners:* Employees of non-profit organizations that managed the intermediary organizations. One citywide non-profit organization convened the Staff Groups as part of its broader operations. Another citywide non-profit organization staffed the Directors and Citizens Group as its sole function.

To highlight membership differences that proved consequential in this case, I refer to the intermediary organizations by the following names, also indicated in Table 1:

- *Staff Groups:* Two intermediary organizations whose central office membership came primarily from the central office frontlines.

- *Directors Group:* The intermediary comprised mainly of agency directors including senior central office administrators.

- *Citizens Group:* The organization with citizen representatives appointed by city council members and the mayor and managed by the Directors Group’s staff.

### Intermediary Organizations’ Functions

Data related to the early to mid 1990s indicated that Oakland’s four intermediary organizations had been established mainly to provide collective accountability for implementation funds and to increase local support for implementation and that they did serve these intended purposes. For example, the state department of education required that each school district participating in Healthy Start create an intermediary organization—what the state called a district-level collaborative—to disburse public funds for Healthy Start implementation.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, Oakland formed an organization that I call a Staff Group by drawing members from the district central office and sites as well as the county offices of education, public health, and social services and a county-level collaboration for children. This group met monthly for most of the 1990s and, by late 1999, had distributed approximately half a million dollars to support implementation of school-community partnerships.

The other Staff Group formed out of an agreement between Oakland leaders and a national philanthropic foundation to award grants to school-community partnerships through the Village

Center Initiative (called Beacon Schools nationally). Frontline central office administrators and site directors attended this intermediary organization's weekly meetings regularly between September 1998 and early 2000 during which time the Staff Group distributed approximately \$1 million in grant funds for site implementation. The Directors Group provided what many senior central office administrators called a "first opportunity" or "catalyst" for county, city, and school agency leaders and elected officials to engage in cross-agency planning for youth development and learning. Documents and conversations with the funder, a national philanthropic foundation, indicated that such boards were meant to symbolize and to realize high-level political support for "systems change" to support positive youth outcomes. Oakland's implementation plan involved the redirection of core county, city, and school district central office resources for Village Center implementation districtwide. The Citizen's Group came together in 1998 under an amendment to the Oakland City Charter mandating that Oakland create a new broad-based organization to disburse an annual 2.5% set-aside of the city general fund dedicated to youth development and learning.

While these activities were important aspects of intermediary organizations' operations, Oakland's intermediary organizations primarily functioned to provide resources—knowledge of sites and policy systems, social/political ties to sites and policy systems, and an administrative infrastructure—necessary for implementation of collaborative education policy but traditionally unavailable in the district central office or sites. The absence of these resources helped define the primary functions of Oakland's intermediary organizations. Accordingly, in each the following sub-sections I make three points: first, I explain briefly that collaborative education policies demanded that the district central office and sites have access to particular resources<sup>3</sup>; second, I highlight that these resources are typically in short supply and difficult to develop in district central offices and sites; third, I demonstrate that all of Oakland's intermediary organizations to some degree provided these resources.

### *Knowledge of Sites and Policy Systems*

Collaborative education policy designs call for sites to develop goals and strategies appropriate to their local needs and resources and for district

central office administrators to enable sites to make and implement their own decisions; sites' decisions and experiences are to serve as key guides for central office resource allocation and rules as opposed to mainly more traditional policy designs in which central office decisions direct site implementation (Honig, 2003). Accordingly, site directors and central office administrators must develop site knowledge—familiarity with sites' goals, strategies, and experiences—and systems knowledge—an understanding of central office resource allocation processes and other procedures that might be aligned to sites' decisions.

One respondent explained that without site knowledge, central office administrators and others imposed their own priorities on sites and otherwise impeded implementation:

Unless there is some ownership and unless someone is [sites are] telling us what they need, then its bureaucrats—and I include non-profit providers in that—sustaining their employment. It's [central office administrators what they] think for whatever reason—some maybe good reasons some maybe not—that people need.

Regarding systems knowledge, one central office administrator emphasized that his ability to support site implementation depended on his knowledge of how central office resources might be directed to support sites' decisions:

Quite frankly, you need to know all that stuff. . . . What are the . . . [school board's] administrative bulletins that are in place? You need to know that . . . What is our policy around sharing information? . . . Contracting, things with vendors, consultants, the nature of things. You need to know that it is out there and kind of know where to go . . . Who you need to talk to.

Another central office administrator confirmed, "That individual [participant in implementation] . . . really needs to be hooked into someone whether it is a mentor or key supervisor but someone . . . that has a firm understanding of how our district [central office] operates [to re-direct central office resources]."

Central office administrators and site directors, in reflecting on implementation in the early 1990s, typically reported that site and systems knowledge were in short supply. According to one long time central office administrator:

All we had to do was a little basic arithmetic to find out . . . how many [staff] can they outstation

if this thing grows to 10 schools. . . . I don't think that kind of basic work [documentation of sites' goals and outcomes] was ever really accomplished to prove the case.

Central office administrators reported that their limited time and sites' under-developed goals and strategies impeded knowledge development. Regarding the latter, several central office administrators acknowledged that early in implementation they had funded sites to begin implementation based on their students' high needs for additional services not sites' "readiness" or their development of goals and strategies and that consequently, site knowledge was essentially unavailable (Oakland School Linked Services Work Group, 1999).

In part to address site knowledge gaps, senior central office administrators reported that they hired new staff into frontline central office positions to serve as site liaisons. Several frontline central office administrators indicated that they believed they had more site knowledge than typical central office administrators and that in their frontline positions they had greater access to sites than if they were "higher up" in the central office hierarchy. According to one:

The thinking was you can't just have a district [central office] person . . . because they general generally won't have that other. [site] experience. That is not the culture. [When they hired me], they wanted someone that came, that had experience in working with [sites] in general, had an understanding about . . . collaborations and working with diverse groups. They felt it better to go on the outside [of the central office].

However, these first-time central office administrators had little familiarity with central office policies or how to change them in ways that might enable implementation. One intermediary convener captured the downsides of hiring central office staff with limited systems knowledge:

If you build a house you get an electrician to do electrical work. You don't expect the electrician to know how to do the plumbing. . . . In the same way, you don't expect the service provider [frontline central office administrator or site director] to be able to articulate the stuff in policy terms.

Adding to these challenges, most central office administrators, site directors, and intermediary conveners interviewed described collaborative policy implementation as "complicated," "diffi-

cult" or "ambiguous" and maintained that more site and systems knowledge did not necessarily mean that they understood how to use it to advance implementation. One long-standing site director suggested that site directors themselves lacked experience communicating their plans and experiences to central office administrators "productively" and that miscommunications occasionally contributed to the challenge.

Oakland's intermediary organizations strengthened site directors' and central office administrators' site and systems knowledge by convening regular meetings, documenting and disseminating information, simplifying information about site experience, and establishing knowledge building as an important, ongoing process.

### *Regular meetings*

Each intermediary organization convened meetings that helped central office administrators and site representatives build such knowledge. Central office administrators and site directors participated directly on the Staff Groups where site implementation reports consumed the lion's share of Staff Group meeting agendas. Members of the Directors and Citizens Groups learned about sites through their full-time staff who had direct contact with sites in part through their participation on the Staff Groups and who reported on site implementation process at their regular meetings. How to support site implementation appeared as the second most frequently discussed topic at both the Directors and Citizens Group meetings, according to observations and official meeting minutes.<sup>4</sup> Some central office administrators commented and observations confirmed the importance of intermediary organizations' meetings to their site knowledge. "I'll find out about [sites' budgets] on Thursday [at a Staff Group meeting]," one central office administrator explained when asked how she kept abreast of sites' progress with fund raising. Another central office administrator confirmed:

I used to be able to go to sites on a regular basis. I was there all the time. Now the [Staff Group] has become important for that. My time has changed. It helps me to know that on the weeks I can't get there [to sites] that I will still connect.

These meetings also helped site directors and central office administrators to access systems knowledge. For example, one Staff Group con-

vened central office business managers early in implementation to inform sites and frontline central office administrators about rules regarding school facilities and to teach business managers about potential conflicts between sites' implementation plans and central office policy. As one Staff Group convener explained:

We [one of my staff people and I] have both been in school reform work for some time and were anticipating that there needed to be a way for people to trouble shoot the issues and not get stalled down in the bureaucracy. So we started having conversations [with business managers]. . . . We were anticipating issues related to access to facilities. We brainstormed everything from having a religious group that wants to meet on a regular basis in a classroom at a school. What would it mean to have a utility pay station set up in the school? We were just trying to think of everything that would pose . . . issues that schools get hung up on.

Intermediary members who knew about these meetings unanimously attributed early implementation successes to the "business managers meetings." Several site directors reported that before there were intermediary meetings they could ask questions about central office policy either by phoning central office administrators or by attending school board meetings. However, phone calls were not always returned and school board meetings typically provided them only three minutes during periods of public comment to share information and no dedicated time for board members' responses.

Intermediary organizations' meetings were well attended. One of the Staff Groups met for at least two hours each week and observations and official meeting minutes confirmed that rarely were sites or the central office not represented. The Citizens Group met semi-monthly for at least two hours. The other Staff Group and the Directors Group met for at least two hours each month. Such high attendance rates appear striking given that intermediary organizations met relatively frequently and that frontline central office administrators in particular faced significant competing demands on their time. When asked in interviews why they regularly attended meetings, central office administrators and site directors reported that missed meetings meant missed opportunities to help chart the course of collaborative policy implementation.

### *Documentation and dissemination of information*

Each intermediary organization also increased central office administrators' and site directors' knowledge by operating as a primary documenter, disseminator, and consumer of information about implementation at site and systems levels. Intermediary organizations' various written records of implementation included formal implementation reports, case studies, and meeting minutes, which were not only available but, only proactively used. One Staff Group hired a former central office administrator to write a ten-year history of Oakland's experience with school-community partnerships that they later used to brief an incoming central office superintendent among others about their progress with implementation (Oakland School Linked Services Work Group, 1999). The Directors Group kept detailed minutes of meetings that their staff frequently reviewed at the start of subsequent meetings to remind themselves and others where they had been and where they were headed.

### *Simplified information about experience*

Intermediary organizations strengthened central office administrators' and site directors' site- and systems-knowledge by helping them manage the sheer amount of complex information available about site- and systems-level implementation. In particular, intermediary organizations "simplified experience" — they translated sites' plans and experiences into discrete terms that central office administrators and sites more easily understood (Hatch, 1997; March, 1994). As one participant in three intermediary organizations explained:

Partnership is easier around specific shared goals without having to be in sync around everything else. Like if we know we want the district [central office] to be more community-friendly we [the intermediary organization] can work through that together with the district and we can move the district on being more open to community involvement and other broad themes of the initiative. . . . Being able to work through those negotiation issues on a small level around four [sites] is doable. You know, forcing the district to have to be more community friendly in general—I mean how would you do that?

Simplifications of experience provided small, concrete steps that central office administrators and sites directors had the capacity to take immediately

and successfully—what Weick called “small wins” (Weick, 1984). As one intermediary member from a county office described:

And if you do A—if you can pin point the one or two things we can do differently immediately, then we can build the broader things. If people don't believe anything can change, you don't spend a year building a theory of change. There is some low hanging fruit. . . . We [policymakers] start making some incremental decisions. We start sharing data. Then gradually we will be doing other things that look more like real systems reform.

### *Ongoing knowledge building processes*

Observations and interviews suggested that intermediary organizations helped build central office and site knowledge by creating regular opportunities for central office administrators and site directors to revisit past decisions and to view implementation as a process of continuous knowledge building. As one central office administrator explained, thanks in large part to the structure of engagement with sites that one intermediary organization provided, he had come to understand collaborative policy implementation as involving ongoing knowledge development:

[I learned] That you can't set something in stone and say this is the way it is going to be forever. It just doesn't work like that. You have to continue to revisit the process and the guidelines that you set forth. Does this still work for us based on our circumstances now? Is this still real for us? Then you modify and change it. . . . Assessment has to be ongoing. This [implementation] is a very fluid sort of operation.

Certain intermediary organizations set aside meeting time specifically to revisit past decisions. The Citizens Group, for example, annually reviewed their grant-making guidelines in a public forum. Central office administrators and sites reported that they knew they had these opportunities to lobby for changes in these guidelines and several pointed to specific changes in the annual call for proposals as evidence that the revision process was genuine.

### *Social and Political Ties to Sites and Policy Systems*

Collaborative education policies demand close central office-site ties to enable the kinds of knowledge building highlighted above. Site directors re-

ported that they tended to share information with individual central office administrators with whom they had developed direct relationships over time through past work rather than with the school district writ large. Central office administrators typically pointed out that applications for funding and sites' funding contracts provided information about what sites planned to accomplish but that the “real deal” about actual implementation decisions, successes, and pitfalls came through phone calls, site visits, and other opportunities for direct, ongoing relationships with sites. Frontline central office administrators indicated that they also needed systems ties—relationships within the central office—to develop their systems knowledge and, ultimately, to marshal central office resources for site implementation. According to one central office administrator:

It is our relationship [with senior central office administrators]. That is why I was able to present arguments as to why that . . . needs to be there [why specific resources needed to be allocated to sites]. . . . If you are not at the table, it makes it kind of hard to do that.

Long-standing site directors indicated that prior to their involvement with particular intermediary organizations they generally had weak ties with the district central office. Frequent turnover of school principals challenged the continuity of such ties (Oakland School Linked Services Work Group, 1999). Most central office administrators reported that they lacked the time necessary to establish such relationships. According to one:

Zero. Well, actually maybe five percent. . . . That was about as deep as I was able to [spend with sites] last week even though I needed to get deeper into it. . . . The thing is I am going to meetings [regarding my other responsibilities]. They might start at 7:30 [a.m.]. My workday doesn't start until 8:30. My first meeting is at 7:30. The next one is at 9:00. The next one is at 11:00. Then there is one at 1:30, one at 3:00 and then when do I get to come in here [to the office]? Maybe at 4:15 I get to come in here and then you have voice mail messages and it takes me 30 minutes to listen to that and then I have got to return those phone calls and that doesn't give me a chance to get to the work [with sites].

Site directors attributed weak central office-site ties to their own mistrust of the district central office after years of the central office's mismanage-

ment and broken promises (both alleged and substantiated) (Coburn & Riley, 2000; Gewertz, 2000; May, 2000). One central office administrator referred to a mid-1990s teachers strike as a point when "we [the district central office] were struggling" to establish strong site relationships. The strike did not impede sites' work directly, but it fed long-standing tensions about central office performance that carried over into collaborative policy implementation. Site directors explained that in Oakland, historically, only "squeaky wheels get new textbook money or portables [buildings] or program money" and that at first they viewed the intermediary organizations as new opportunities to demand assistance. Site directors reported that they intended "to throw a hissy [fit]" at meetings or that implementation would "really break apart" if the meetings ended without the central office administrators allocating resources to sites. Budget crises, superintendent turnover (four between 1990 and 2000), and threats of state takeover were not infrequent in Oakland (Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team, 2000). Frontline central office administrators reported their willingness to be responsive to sites but that they struggled to manage the frustrations such crises generated among site directors. One conversation at a Staff Group meeting illustrates such tensions:

Former Central Office Administrator: [arguing that particular sites can weather a recent central office decision not to provide promised funding]: I think depending on your vision and what you are doing costs can vary greatly. I know some places would die for your budgets. . . . I'm saying it varies widely. . . .

Site Director: You have never even been to my site. You don't even know our budgets. You make us crazy every time you talk like this. I don't care what my total budget looks like to you. If I can't make my payroll because I may not receive the check you promised this is going to hit the fan. We need to follow up on this. This is really contentious.

Intermediary organizations helped manage such long-standing tensions between sites and the district central office. Site directors in particular counted such management as among intermediaries' central contributions to implementation. As one site director highlighted:

When the district [central office] is obligated to provide services, who makes sure that hap-

pens? The broader policy issue is how do we take heat off sites so you don't have to spend relationship capital to get things resolved that should not require negotiations. It's a role for [the intermediary].

Another site director corroborated the important role for intermediary organizations as managers of central office-site ties. When one intermediary convener proposed that the intermediary organization play a lesser role in implementation, the site director reacted:

I don't want [the intermediary to provide] a list of people in the district [I should contact for support]. What I don't want is for someone to tell me to talk to [an Assistant Superintendent]. It's a question of are you [the intermediary] marshalling the process? Are you taking it on?

Sustained observations revealed that "taking it on" involved two specific strategies: translating sites' implementation experiences into terms on which central office administrators could/would take action and buffering sites from central office non-responsiveness.

#### *Translation of sites' demands into actionable terms*

Intermediary organizations helped sites translate their implementation experiences into requests to which central office administrators believed they could respond, similar to the simplifications of experience highlighted above. For example, directors of one site attributed early implementation difficulties to persistent safety problems before and after school. The site directors, seasoned community organizers, had made frequent presentations at school board and city council meetings to call for radical reform of Oakland's police department, but neither the school district nor the city police department had responded. Frontline central office administrators almost unanimously reported that they were aware of the site's safety concerns but that they had not taken steps to address them. At a series of Staff Group meetings during their first years of operation, the site directors and other intermediary members translated the site directors' original demands into a specific, de-politicized request for changed police schedules at a particular street intersection that they identified as a "tipping point" for neighborhood safety problems. Staff Group members (also full-time staff to the Directors Group) submitted this

proposal to the City Manager's Office and, subsequently, the Chief of Police, central office administrators, and site directors agreed to a series of meetings to explore both the specific safety proposal and whether the sites' neighborhoods would provide useful testing grounds for broader police reforms.

### *Buffers for sites*

Intermediary organizations also helped manage long-standing, strained relationships between sites and the central office by buffering sites from central office non-responsiveness. For example, the Staff Groups occasionally made special grants to sites out of their own funds to help sites meet their payroll demands and otherwise weather delays in the central office's processing of payments. The Citizens Group continued to fund sites, regardless of central agency budgets, thanks to the 12-year amendment to the city charter that allocated a set percentage of the city general fund as their annual budget.

Intermediary organizations also buffered sites from unexpected central office policy changes by serving as a sort of advance warning team that communicated central office rules and procedures to sites, explained the rationale for existing policies and policy changes, and offered suggestions for how to manage such changes. Staff Groups often deployed members to sites to provide such updates. For example, when the central office temporarily suspended promised funding to sites, one Staff Group sent a letter to all site directors explaining the situation, taking responsibility for not leveraging the promised central office funds, and making themselves available to sites to discuss alternatives. As one member of both Staff Groups explained when reflecting on the role of intermediary organizations in such instances, "We need to be the conscience of the process and the constant face in the face of change."

### *Administrative Infrastructure*

Collaborative education policy designs call for sites to develop goals and strategies specific to the needs and strengths of their students; in turn, central office administrator shift from distributing relatively uniform resources across all sites to providing resources specific to individual site goals and strategies, including the deployment of staff to work with sites individually. I call these demands "site-by-site support." One long time cen-

tral office administrator captured respondents' consensus regarding the importance of site-by-site support:

I think the thing in my experience that really makes [site implementation] work is somebody having the resources to really staff and move it forward. Actually that's probably the single most important thing . . . individualized support for it. 'Cause I think it just takes more time and energy to work with each school . . . about what they need and what . . . things cost. So much really depends. It's really a case-by-case, school-by-school basis.

The district central office, like other government bureaucracies, generally did not have an administrative apparatus—budget, evaluation, or staffing systems—for site-by-site support. A comprehensive state audit found the districts' budgeting and accountability systems incongruous with school site-based decision making let alone collaborative site-based decision making (Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team, 2000). The interim superintendent observed that traditional central office administrator training had left his central office and school staff ill prepared to implement policy strategies involving site-based decision-making:

Because of the diversity of the community and of this district and of the individual people working here there has always been the feeling that no one size fits all and those decisions are best left to school site personnel including parents and community members. Problem is, none of these folks [central office administrators or school principals] have had training in supporting that kind of decision-making.

One frontline central office administrator indicated that barriers to site-by-site support included lack of time for central office administrators' to work with sites individually:

Once [implementation] . . . grew to four to five schools . . . it got to the point where we realized, wow, now I had so much else on my plate that we really need to bring in somebody. So we . . . hired S- . . . the same thing happened to him. Then we got L- . . . and pretty soon it just, the quicksand starts sucking you down. And that's just the way it is in a bureaucracy. . . . It's inevitable that it will happen.

In addition, central office administrators and site directors did not always agree about how to

define site-by-site support and these disagreements impeded implementation. For example, during a particularly contentious debate at a series of Staff Group meetings, central office administrators argued that certain sites had just received significant federal grants and, with annual operating budgets over \$1 million in some cases, did not need the same level of assistance from the district central office as sites without such grants. The grant-winning sites objected on the grounds that the central office should not penalize them for their hard-won success at attracting additional funds and that the size of their programs meant that their annual budgets barely covered their costs. Both central office administrators and site directors advocated for distribution of resources on a site-by-site basis. However, central office administrators assessed site-by-site support by comparing sites' budgets whereas certain site directors defined site-by-site support as funding commensurate with their particular expenses.

Intermediary organizations addressed these challenges by helping to establish resource allocation systems appropriate to site-by-site support, augmenting staff time available for site-by-site support, and developing new standards for resource allocation and site accountability.

#### *Site and central office systems for resource allocation*

Intermediary organizations promoted the use of memoranda of understanding (MOUs) for the allocation of resources and other supports on a site-by-site basis. Unlike some other government contracts that delineated services a vendor would provide in return for payment, Oakland's MOUs established the contributions various parties would make toward achieving specific, shared implementation outcomes. The three intermediary organizations that disbursed funding directly to sites used MOUs to clarify how the intermediary organizations would assist sites with implementation and each site's reciprocal obligations to raise additional funds, develop a collaborative planning process, and improve specific student outcomes. The intermediary organizations helped central office administrators craft their own MOUs with sites; this strategy enabled the central office to enter into site-by-site agreements without tackling the total reinvention of the central offices' budgeting and staffing systems in the short term. As one former central office administrator reported,

MOUs provided a basic structure for site-by-site support:

MOUs really were a Healthy Start thing. The state [Department of Education] suggested MOUs but the [Staff Group] really gave shape to them. Then when we had [funds for sites] coming in through [the Staff Group] we used MOUs to give the money out and to establish sort of basic agreements about the money, because each site would use it differently. Then we used MOUs for the Village Centers, for the Village Center funds, to give out those funds to help start Village Centers. . . . Well by then MOUs were how we did things but there was no template. So we worked to develop a template for [central office] MOUs and now that's pretty much, pretty much how it's done.

#### *Staff time*

Intermediary organizations increased the number of staff hours dedicated to site-by-site support through several strategies. First, interviews and observations confirmed that the intermediary meetings provided regular, structured opportunities for central office administrators to focus on individual site issues. As discussed earlier, the meetings typically featured reports about sites' implementation progress and provided other opportunities to bring information about sites' plans and experiences to central office administrators' attention. In addition, each intermediary organization hired or dedicated staff that increased the sheer number of person hours spent responding to sites' requests for support. For example, a citywide non-profit organization managed the Staff Groups and helped sites develop their collaborative partnerships, evaluate their programs, and raise funds. The Directors Group hired staff experienced with site-by-site coaching who were not necessarily eligible for or interested in formal positions within governmental agencies. These staff provided a range of assistance including convening sites to network with their peers.

#### *Standards and accountability*

Intermediary organizations also managed disputes about site-by-site support by developing and maintaining clear standards and accountability processes for the provision of support and by providing regular opportunities to revisit both. These processes and opportunities for revisions helped establish expectations that rules and resource allo-

cations would vary across sites and overtime, and site directors, central office administrators, and others could participate formally in establishing the terms of resource allocation decisions. For example, the Citizens Group operated under a provision in the Oakland City Charter to develop a five-year strategic plan and to issue applications for site funding annually based on that plan (Planning and Oversight Committee of the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth, 1997). This structure provided two different opportunities for setting and revisiting standards: the strategic plan outlined the broad parameters for grant making and a schedule for revising those parameters every five years; the Request for Applications was revised annually in ways consistent with the five-year strategic plan. When a city council member lobbied to decrease site funding one year to cover costs for a new housing program unrelated to collaborative policy implementation, the Citizens Group pointed to the strategic plan as the basis for rejecting this request and successfully avoided the displacement of funds. Intermediary organizations without legal mandates regarding regular review of rules created their own review schedules by clarifying their decision rules after the fact and establishing explicit lines of accountability. One Staff Group, for example, publicly took responsibility for its decision not to provide promised funding to particular sites and communicated this decision and its rationale widely at meetings and through letters to site directors.

### **Intermediary Organizations' Constraining and Enabling Conditions**

The section above identified functions of all four focal intermediary organizations. In this section I examine the extent to which each intermediary organization performed these functions and the conditions that constrained or enabled these operations. My comparative analysis revealed two broad sets of findings. First, conditions that enabled site knowledge and ties—i.e. having frontline central office administrators as members—constrained systems knowledge and ties; conditions that enabled systems knowledge and ties—specifically, having senior central office administrators as members or close allies—contributed to weak site knowledge and ties. In practice, this meant Staff Groups generally had site knowledge and ties to inform central office policy changes but weak systems knowledge and

ties to marshal those changes; the Citizens and Directors Groups had the systems knowledge and ties to marshal policy changes but not the site knowledge on which to base them or the ties for strengthening their site knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Second, over time three intermediary organizations faced fiscal constraints that weakened their independence from the central office and other funders. Eventually, these constraints curtailed their core functions and prompted the three organizations to cease intermediary operations or completely disband.

#### *Resource Tradeoffs:*

##### *Site Versus Systems Knowledge and Ties*

Staff Groups typically had stronger site knowledge and ties but weaker systems knowledge and ties than either the Citizens or the Directors Groups. As elaborated above, Staff Groups included site directors who shared site information directly as well as frontline central office administrators who had relatively more site knowledge and ties than other policymakers. An analysis of meeting minutes and transcripts between 1998 and 2000 revealed that site directors share significantly more information about their implementation plans and progress with each Staff Group than with the Directors and Citizens Groups combined.

Observations also uncovered several instances in which Staff Groups members demonstrated a lack of systems knowledge and ties. For example, in the late 1990s site directors requested information from one Staff Group about district central office procedures for hiring adults to work on school campuses. State and federal law delineated specific hiring procedures in these cases. However, participating frontline central office administrators were unfamiliar with those rules and suggested that the rules were ambiguous (as opposed to just unclear to them) when they asked the districts' legal staff to clarify existing procedures. Weeks of debate ensued among Staff Group members as though they had discretion to develop their own procedures. Eventually, the legal department returned a "judgment"—essentially a copy of federal and state laws—that contradicted sites' wishes. By that time, Staff Group members had spent weeks in debate rather than negotiating for policy changes.

On the flipside, the Directors and Citizens Groups had precisely the systems knowledge and ties that Staff Groups lacked. Members of the

Directors Group essentially were “the system” — the interim superintendent, school board members, and their counter parts from other sectors with the authority to set their agencies’ official policies. The Directors Group’s mandate also included the power to affect systems changes in support of site implementation. The Citizens Group members were handpicked to represent the city council and the mayor. Importantly, the Directors Group’s full-time staff also managed the Citizens Group and reported that their main responsibilities included support for the flow of information and relationships between the Citizens Group and various public agencies including the district central office.

However, interviews and conversations with site directors confirmed the analysis of meeting minutes I highlighted — that the Directors and Citizens Groups had significantly less knowledge of and ties to sites than the Staff Groups. Site directors often reported that they believed the citizen members of the Citizens Group lacked the expertise necessary to assist them with implementation and that they did not seek such support from them.<sup>6</sup> Frequent comments from site directors in meetings and interviews indicated that the Directors Group members “already [had] all the money and the power” and that sites should be careful about including them in conversations about implementation process. This caution played out in practice. For example, at the end of the 1990s, the interim superintendent requested that Directors Group staff work with the central office to survey middle schools to increase the Directors Group’s knowledge of the community partnerships in which each school engaged. The lead project staff reported that this labor-intensive effort mainly yielded incomplete or unreturned surveys. When asked to explain this response, staff suggested that school principals likely did not see the value in completing a survey associated with the Directors Group because the Directors Group lacked “the pull” with schools, that school principals did not know “what’s in it for them” to work with the Directors Group, and that many were “suspicious” of the Directors Group because they claimed to support site implementation but did not provide funding directly to sites.

Importantly, Oakland’s participants did not seem to view these resource tradeoffs as fundamentally problematic but as constraints to be managed. During frequent conversations at Staff

Group meetings and two Directors Group meetings, participants noted the intermediary organizations’ various strengths and weaknesses and pursued plans to create new relationships among the intermediary organizations that built on the strengths of each. For example, one plan called for the creation of a new intermediary infrastructure in which the Staff and Citizens Groups operated as committees of the Directors’ Group. In this configuration, the Directors Group would mediate between “the system” and the other intermediaries while the other intermediaries would mediate between sites and the Directors Group.

#### *Fiscal Constraints and Diminishing Independence Over Time*

Oakland’s intermediary organizations managed these tradeoffs and participated centrally in implementation through much of the mid to late 1990s. But by the end of that decade, each faced fiscal constraints that jeopardized its independent status, and, ultimately, its functions. Specifically, at the end of the 1990s one of the Staff Groups spent approximately six months developing a plan to fund additional sites. Subsequently, the interim school district superintendent announced that the school district would not contribute promised funds for site expansion in the short term and he transferred Staff Group responsibility to a new frontline central office administrator who had multiple other programs and initiatives to manage. The interim superintendent indicated in an interview and at two intermediary meetings that a significant budget shortfall and negative state audit left him little choice but to freeze resources in multiple areas including collaborative policy implementation and that he hoped the budget freeze would be short-lived (Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team, 2000). Rather than draw on their reserves or other funding sources, Staff Group members suspended their site expansion plan. Transcripts of interviews and several Staff Group meetings suggested that Staff Group members generally believed they could not proceed without the school district central office’s financial and political support from the school district central office. The Staff Group’s original funding had expired and the Staff Group’s non-profit conveners expressed reluctance to dedicate funding to site expansion themselves when, according to one, their “primary systems players weren’t doing their part.” Attendance at Staff Group meetings waned

among site directors and central office administrators and soon thereafter the Staff Group disbanded.

By the late 1990s, the other Staff Group had a budget of approximately \$300,000 in new state and federal revenue to allocate to sites. When the late 1990s budget shortfall hit, the interim superintendent requested that the Staff Group commit 80% to cover the district's costs of providing mandated health services. The interim superintendent argued the one-time commitment of funds would help alleviate some of the districts' fiscal strains and that district health staff helped generate that revenue in the first place.<sup>7</sup> After significant debate and a change in superintendent, the Staff Group agreed to surrender the 80%. Several Staff Group members commented that they believed the "funds were lost anyway" and at least the "voluntary" contribution could cast them as supportive of the superintendent and thereby put them in a potentially stronger bargaining position in the future. Shortly thereafter, the non-profit convener of the Staff Group resigned for a post in another organization, and without funding to allocate the Staff Group suspended further meetings at least for the short term.

Meanwhile, the Directors Group faced increasingly negative pressure from its national funder to cease support for collaborative policy implementation. According to correspondence, publications, and conversations, the foundation had taken a position that school-community partnerships would not yield the kinds of demonstrable improvements in the status of youth that the foundation's initiative required. Members of the Directors Group spent approximately one and a half years rebutting the funder's concerns and debating internally whether the group should proceed with its own plans and surrender the foundation funds. Several Directors Group members pointed out that as heads of major county and city agencies collectively they could construct a budget for the intermediary organization using local funds. However, Directors Group members ultimately decided that the value of participating in the high profile national initiative outweighed the limitations. They abandoned the school-community partnership strategy at least in the short term, launched a new policy initiative to provide targeted services to juvenile offenders, and changed their name to amplify that they had become a new organization.

The Citizens Group ran significantly less risk of redirection. The amendment to the city charter that authorized both the Citizens Group and its funding operated for twelve years or longer if a subsequent popular ballot initiative enabled extension. However, the Citizens Group depended on the Directors Group for its full time staff. As part of its own reinvention, the Directors Group decided that staff support to the Citizens Group was inconsistent with its new juvenile justice focus. Subsequently, a local community foundation agreed to provide staff support to the Citizens Group. The effects of this change on the Citizens Groups' intermediary role could not be observed within the period of study. However, given the significant role that Citizens Group staff played in helping this organization operate as an intermediary organization rather than simply as a surrogate grant maker for the city, this change did not bode well for the Citizen's Group's operation as an organization with distinct, intermediary functions.

In sum, Oakland's intermediary organizations faced several bumps in the road during collaborative policy implementation. No one intermediary organization had the capacity to address all the site-central office resource gaps at equally high levels—a constraint many reported as a challenge to be managed rather than a fatal obstacle. By contrast, fiscal constraints over time ultimately jeopardized the intermediary organizations' survival.

### **Summary, Conclusions, and Implications**

This article draws on findings from a strategic research site to begin to build theory about intermediary organizations as distinct actors in education policy implementation. Without such a knowledge base, policymakers of various stripes may misjudge their available implementation resources and overlook opportunities to enable change. Intermediary organizations themselves may fail to make the best use of their distinctive institutional resources.

I show that Oakland's intermediary organizations operated between the district central office and sites to leverage changes for both parties. These intermediary organizations depended on central office administrators and site directors/staff to define their functions and central office and site participation helped shape the extent to which intermediary organizations executed those functions. At the same time, the intermediary or-

ganizations added distinct value to these parties — in this case, site and systems knowledge, site and systems ties, and administrative tools otherwise unavailable from the district central office or sites. Accordingly, the empirical findings from this Oakland case study support the theoretical definition of intermediary organizations posited above: *Intermediary organizations occupy the space between at least two other parties and primarily function to mediate or manage change in both those parties. These organizations operate independently of these two parties and provide distinct value beyond that which the parties alone would be able to develop or to amass themselves. These organizations also depend on those parties to perform their essential functions.*

The research presented here also suggests several additions to this basic definition that are important guides for further inquiry. First, the literature review at the start of this article revealed: *Intermediary organizations vary along at least five dimensions—the parties between which they mediate as well as their composition, location, scope of work, and funding sources.* Second, as the display of case study data suggests, it may be virtually impossible to understand the value that intermediary organizations add in policy implementation without an analysis of policymakers' and implementers' implementation demands and their limitations in meeting them. Accordingly: *Intermediary organizations' functions and their abilities to perform those functions are context specific—contingent on given policy demands and policymakers' and implementers' capacity to meet those demands themselves.*

The Oakland case also shows that intermediary organizations' constraining and enabling conditions may vary even when they operate in the same location and essentially focus on similar implementation challenges. In this study, site and systems knowledge and ties appeared as tradeoffs. Respondents' comments and the proposed intermediary reorganization plan suggested that the fact that no one intermediary organization had all the necessary resources to fill the resources gaps is not inherently problematic. The more fundamental implementation question is do intermediaries and other organizations comprise a web of relationships and operate in connected and coordinated ways to fill gaps between policymakers and implementers? These observations suggest another corollary to the working definition of inter-

mediary organization: *Intermediary organizations can augment their own capacity to carry out their core functions as needs change and lessons are learned in part by participating in a web of intermediary supports that build on the strength of each organization.*

The Oakland case also suggests that *long-term fiscal independence may be fundamental to the survival of intermediary organizations.* Recall that Oakland's intermediary organizations did not seem to risk over dependence on the district central office or its other funders throughout most of the 1990s. In fact, the Staff Groups in particular helped sites weather the somewhat regular central office fiscal constraints over the course of the 1990s. But by the end of the 1990s, the intermediary organizations had begun to exhaust their own discretionary resources for sustaining both sites and themselves, the central office suspended its promised support, and, ultimately, three intermediary organizations essentially folded.

#### *Implications for Practice and Research*

This study examined a single albeit strategic case, which limits its power for providing direct lessons for practice. Nonetheless, this study raises several questions for policymakers to consider. For one, should policymakers seek to involve intermediary organizations in implementation? The Oakland case does not offer a prescription but rather shows that in some circumstances intermediary organizations can help augment resources necessary for implementation. Intermediary organizations—especially intermediary organizations that draw members from other organizations—may be an implementation support strategy that suited Oakland particularly well. Oakland's site directors generally had the wherewithal to hold their own (and then some) in potentially intimidating intermediary meetings with central office administrators and other traditional site monitors and funders. Central office administrators were active members and representatives from Oakland's well-developed non-profit sector played key roles. Similar intermediary organizations in districts without such strong site leadership, central office participation, and non-profit experience may not fare as well as Oakland's. Accordingly, the question other policymakers might consider is not how to establish intermediary organizations just like Oakland's but what intermediary arrangements might be appropriate to their particular local contexts.

Second, how can the participation of intermediary organizations be strengthened to improve the quality of education policy implementation? The importance of fiscal independence suggests that policymakers could build dedicated resources for intermediary operations into policy design. This recommendation comes with two cautions: (a) dedicated funding can lead to unproductive over reliance on the funder, particularly if the funder and intermediary organization disagree about intermediary functions as was the case with the Directors Group and, by extension, the Citizens Group; (b) dedicated funding for intermediary operations may create intermediary constituencies with investments in perpetuating the intermediary organizations even after they have outlived their use. However, the Oakland case demonstrates a well-worn lesson of organizational change: any shift—particularly an institutional shift—requires an infusion of new resources to facilitate reform. Policymakers might consider providing short-term funding for intermediary organizations to establish their infrastructure and decreased funding over time as intermediary organizations generate other revenue or exhaust their purpose and disband.

Policymakers and others may strengthen individual intermediary organizations also by supporting multiple intermediary organizations. When viewed together Oakland's four intermediary organizations had the makings of a system of support linking various sites with different levels of the district central office (and other policy systems). Given significant gulfs between policymakers and implementers in public school districts and other arenas, arguably it is unreasonable to expect any one intermediary organization alone to provide a sufficient bridge.

This case also suggests avenues for future policy research. For one, findings come from a single case of a particular type of intermediary organization. Do the propositions presented here hold for similar intermediary organizations in other contexts? Do they hold for intermediary organizations with different features? In particular, Oakland's intermediary organizations seemed to have special opportunities to connect with the central office and sites in part because of their geographic proximity. External intermediary organizations may fare well in other districts or struggle from lack of regular access to policymakers and implementers. Future research may illuminate the pros and cons of different intermediary organization across contexts.

Second, Oakland's intermediary organizations were established anew primarily to serve intermediary functions. However, as discussed earlier, many self-identified intermediary organizations add that descriptor on to a repertoire of other tasks. Does adding on intermediary functions raise different opportunities and obstacles than those presented here?

Third, intermediary organizations operate in complex policy arenas that include not only the policymakers and implementers between whom they mediate but their various funders as well. The trajectory of the Directors Group suggests that funders can significantly curb intermediary organizations' operations when funders and intermediary members disagree about goals and strategies. An exploration of funders' roles seems essential, particularly in cases in which intermediary organizations operate without their own revenue streams.

Fourth, how do intermediary organizations fare over the long term? Will intermediary organizations evolve, change, and possibly die over time as sites and central offices enhance their own resources and change their practice or will sites and central offices become over-reliant on intermediary organizations and avoid building the necessary knowledge, ties, and administrative infrastructure themselves? Will intermediary organizations tend to perpetuate their own existence even after they have outlasted their use? Will dedicated funding over the long term help or make matters worse? These questions seem imperative given intermediary organizations' essential role as an enabler of changes in other organizations.

Finally, as intermediary organizations become more prominent participants in education policy implementation and future research elaborates their processes, researchers must attend to questions of success and failure. Specifically, on what basis shall the success and failure of intermediary organizations be judged? This study provides some initial parameters and propositions that can help frame such an inquiry. In particular, this study emphasizes that intermediary organizations inherently are dependent on other parties for the definition and execution of their core functions—a dependency that will challenge researchers who aim to develop discrete measures of intermediary organizations' specific added value in various contexts. Regardless of future evaluation findings, ongoing research on intermediary organizations promises to shed new light on the essential spaces

in between branches of formal policy systems where implementation unfolds.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See for example: Cibulka & Kritek (1996); Mawhinney & Smrekar (1996); Smylie & Crowson (1996); Smylie, Crowson, Chou, and Levin (1994); Marsh (2003).

<sup>2</sup> This intermediary organization oversaw funds associated with the Local Educational Agency Medi-Cal Billing Option. This federal program reimbursed school districts for their share of the cost of providing required health services to students. Before the Billing Option, school districts (i.e., Local Educational Agencies or LEAs) and states split the costs of these services. Under the Billing Option, the former federal Health Care Finance Administration reimbursed LEAs for their share of the cost. The California Department of Education required that districts participating in this program make decisions about allocating the new revenue through a collaborative process and that funding priority go to Healthy Start implementation.

<sup>3</sup> I elaborate on these demands in two separate papers (Honig, 2002, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Filling member vacancies appeared as the most frequently discussed topic for the Citizens Group. As discussed later, the most frequent topic for the Directors Group concerned how to negotiate their mission with their national benefactor.

<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere I call this tradeoff the "paradox of the periphery" (Honig, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Respondents' most frequent comment about the Citizens Group concerned members' inexperience with site implementation. Several respondents noted and reviews of meeting minutes and group procedures confirmed that city laws regarding conflicts of interest barred individuals from serving on the Citizens Group if they had personal or professional ties to implementing sites or other investments in the futures of their potential grant recipients.

<sup>7</sup> See note 3 for an explanation of this intermediary organization's revenue stream.

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