



LEADS

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LEADS, a publication of the Center for Education Policy and Leadership (CEPAL) at the University of Maryland, College Park, features research by university faculty and students that addresses contemporary education policy and leadership issues. LEADS aims to provide educators and policymakers with research they can use to strengthen the education of all students. We call this publication LEADS to highlight the importance of research in suggesting ideas, resources, and actions for educational improvement.

This issue of LEADS is based on research conducted between 1998-2000 in Oakland, California, by Dr. Meredith Honig, Assistant Professor of Education Policy and Leadership and Co-director of CEPAL. CEPAL draws on that research to provide insights for educators and policymakers regarding how district central office administrators can support school-community partnerships as a strategy for strengthening student learning.

Supporting school-community partnerships: District central office administrators' roles and capacity

How can school district central office administrators support the implementation of school-community partnerships— i.e., collaborations between schools and community agencies such as health and human services organizations, businesses, museums, and Boys and Girls Clubs? Over the last decade, an increasing number of education policies have encouraged or required school-community partnerships as a school improvement strategy— upping the ante on school district central office administrators to support their implementation. For example, the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative promotes such partnerships as a central goal. State, federal, and local policies related to math, science, bilingual education, parental involvement and school governance require or recommend school-community partnerships as one aspect of broader school improvement strategies. These policies build on a growing body of research and experience that demonstrates the positive contributions of these partnerships to students' grades and attendance, school climate, and other educational outcomes. Partnerships tend to achieve these results when they have particular features including services and supports that are flexible, responsive to youths' strengths, and determined locally— by school teachers, youth workers, and others closest to students. (For an elaboration please see the comprehensive research review by Honig, Kahne, and McLaughlin cited in the reference section.) Research and experience also teach that in practice central office administrators and other policymakers have tended to impede the local decision making at the heart of these partnerships.

Non-traditional roles for central office administrators in implementation

Collaborative education policies ask school and community leaders to work together to choose and implement shared goals and collaborative strategies for improving student learning. Central office administrators in turn face demands to enable and support schools and community agencies in making and implementing such decisions. These demands flip traditional decision-making roles for schools and district central offices on their heads. Schools (with their community partners) become more central agenda-setters for their local school reform efforts—roles traditionally held by school district central offices. Central offices become supporters of others' decisions— roles traditionally held by schools.

These support roles for central office administrators involve specific information management activities: (1) The continuous collection of information about school-community partnerships' goals, strategies, and experiences and (2) the use of that information to drive changes in central office policies with the specific aim of helping school-community partnerships implement their own local decisions. These central office roles are inherently difficult and require particular resources typically in short supply in district central offices.

- Access to information. Central office administrators need access to information about school-community partnerships' decisions and actual experiences as well as about central office policies that may enable or constrain implementation. Without

partnership information, central office administrators risk developing central office policies that are irrelevant to the partnerships. Information about central office policies helps central office administrators navigate supportive policy changes through the central office chain of command. Partnerships can share information about their decisions and experiences through site plans that they submit regularly to the central office. However, the developmental nature of school-community partnerships increases the urgency for daily or weekly contact between school principals and other site directors and central office administrators.

- Strong relationships with partnerships and within the central office. Partnership representatives such as school principals and community agency directors may be more likely to share the information noted above with central office administrators if they trust them and know them through ongoing joint work. Likewise using partnership information to inform central office policy often requires authority beyond that of any one central office administrator; the ability of individual central office administrators to effect changes in central office policy depends on the strength of their relationships with others who do have the requisite authority, including school board members and assistant and deputy superintendents.
- Time, discretion, and resource allocation mechanisms. Central office administrators need time and discretion over their own workday to attend to the often unpredictable daily issues that arise during implementation of school-community partnerships. In addition, a central office budgeting system that can accommodate highly differentiated school-community budgets seems essential to staffs' ability to allocate resources according to partnerships' own goals and strategies.

District central offices occasionally hire new staff people with on-the-ground implementation experience into new central office posts to increase the central office supply of these resources. This strategy has pluses and minuses. On the one hand, these staff bolster central office information about and relationships with partnerships. On the other hand, these staff typically have limited experience within the central office and accordingly weak central office information and relationships necessary for using that information to effect central office policy changes.

Questions for Practice

This discussion raises several questions for district central office leaders who aim to support the implementation of school-community partnerships:

- To what extent do I and my staff recognize that successful implementation will require us to adopt distinctly non-traditional central office roles vis-à-vis schools and community agencies?
- Have I marshaled needed support for my staff— the resources highlighted above as well as low-risk opportunities for staff to experiment with these new roles?
- How can I take advantage of the benefits of hiring new central office administrators with extensive knowledge of school-level implementation while minimizing the limitations?

For Further Reading

This issue of LEADS is adapted from:

Honig, M.I. (2003). Building policy from practice: District central office administrators' roles and capacity for implementing collaborative education policy. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39(3), 292-338.

Related resources:

Honig, M.I., Kahne, J., & McLaughlin, M.W. (2001). School-community connections: Strengthening opportunity to learn and opportunity to teach. In V. Richardson, (Ed.) *Handbook of research on teaching* (4th Ed.) (pp. 998-1028). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

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