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A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts



SCHOOL
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Newsletter

Building Capacity for Quality Teaching and Leadership

A Design Group convened by School Communities that Work: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts is developing a variety of tools and ideas to help enable districts to work more effectively in enhancing the ability of educators to make all students and schools successful.

Capacity for Quality at Scale

The Design Group on Building Capacity for Quality Teaching and Leadership has reviewed research about effective practices and developed a set of principles for providing and supporting high-quality teaching and learning across an entire district.

Assessing the Central Office

An urban superintendent talks about the value of using a structured process for assessing district capacity, such as the Central Office Assessment Tool now being developed by the Design Group.

Building Capacity for Quality Teaching and Leadership

In the past few years there has been a growing consensus that high-quality teaching and leadership are the most critical factors in school improvement. Evidence abounds that teacher quality has a substantial influence on student learning and that the presence of strong, capable, instructionally focused administrators makes a significant difference in the effectiveness of schools. Only with a full complement of knowledgeable and skilled educators will all students and schools become successful.

There is increasing recognition, though, that teachers and school leaders need enormous support in order to



achieve such success. Most teachers were prepared in an earlier time and need additional skills to bring all students to achievement levels only a few had been expected to reach before. Principals, too, were for the most part not prepared for a system organized around challenging standards for all students. And few schools have created new roles for teachers to enable them to build the capacity of peers within their own buildings.

Yet while there is widespread support for policies and practices to improve the capabilities of educators, there has been less attention to the crucial question of whether central offices of school districts are in a position to provide such support. If central offices lack the capacity to enhance the knowledge and skills of teachers and school leaders and build new structures for ongoing support within schools, the goal of high-quality teaching and leadership is unlikely to be reached. While other entities can provide some support, few can do so on the scale of central offices.

To examine what it would take to build the necessary support for educators and schools on a large scale, School Communities that Work: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts convened a Design Group on Building Capacity for Quality Teaching and Leadership. Composed of researchers, practitioners, and policy makers, the Design Group is now developing and will test a variety of tools and ideas to help enable districts to work more effectively in enhancing the ability of educators to make all students and schools successful.

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Capacity for Quality at Scale

As educators and policy makers are well aware, the troubling reality about American public education is that schools work well for some students and their families, but for many they hardly work at all. Glaring gaps in achievement exist between racial and ethnic groups, between rich and poor, and between urban and nonurban areas.

Of course, there are high-achieving students, good schools, and high-quality teachers in almost every community. The problem is one of scale. Good schools and good instruction have never been widely available to all students. To make them available, schools need a range of supports, and numerous studies and reflections on practice agree on what these supports are:

- high standards and expectations, a shared philosophy about learning, and the authority to make key decisions, including hiring staff who support the philosophy;
- a pool of well-qualified teachers and administrators;
- incentives to participate in, and ready access to, high-quality professional development, curriculum support, and on-site assistance;
- respectful and trusting relationships that connect school staff, students, and parents—both on a person-to-person basis and through formal organizations like parentteacher associations and unions;
- a mechanism for monitoring school progress in terms of equity, achievement, and other important student outcomes;
- access to economies of scale (for functions like data and technology management as well as transportation, food services, etc.); and
- substantive parent and community involvement in schools and in the lives of students.

A ROLE FOR CENTRAL OFFICE

While research and experience have identified the supports schools need to be effective, there is less certainty about how to provide them on a large scale. This is particularly true about the most critical resource: the capacity to teach all students well all of the time. The growing body of research on effective instruction and schooling strongly suggests that school district central offices can play a significant role in equipping teachers and school leaders with supports and resources to enable them to do their jobs well.

But the literature also shows that few central offices play this role effectively. In many cases, this is because central offices themselves lack the capacity they need to build capacity within schools.

“Building capacity” has become something of a cliché in education circles. The important question is, capacity for what? Capacity to conduct ineffective practice is not worth having. Yet members of the Design Group on Building Capacity for Quality Teaching and Leadership recognized that there was substantial agreement among respected scholars and practitioners about the types of practices that are effective. The Group brought together this research into a set of principles, which it calls “Generally Accepted Principles of Teaching and Learning” (GAPTL). Like the Generally Accepted Accounting Principles used in financial statements, the GAPTL represents a starting point.

A system designed to enhance educators’ capabilities can only work if those capabilities are clearly defined from the outset. The GAPTL implies characteristics of effective school communities, which includes school boards, central offices, schools, and the local community. Districts and communities that accept the GAPTL will want to structure their central offices in these ways (see box on pages 4–5).

ASSESSING CAPACITY

How can districts structure themselves to support the principles of good teaching and learning? The first step is to understand current practices. Just as student assessment is an essential tool in teaching, assessing central office functions can be vital. Too often district leaders make decisions based on the latest fad or pressure from school boards or parents, rather than on solid information about what is working and what is not.

To help districts collect such information in a systematic way, the Design Group is developing a Central Office Assessment Tool (COAT). The COAT is designed to help districts see if they are organized to support instruction that aligns to the Generally Accepted Principles of Teaching and Learning—and, if not, what they need to address to strengthen the alignment. Thus, the COAT can become a key element in the effort to redesign school districts so that they work effectively for all schools and all students.

The assessment tool does not address everything that central offices do in relation to schools, but it holds up

Some Key Principles of Teaching and Learning

The Generally Accepted Principles of Teaching and Learning (GAPTL) carry implications for teaching (■) and for local education support systems (■). The following is an excerpt; the complete GAPTL will be available on the School Communities that Work Web site (www.schoolcommunities.org) in summer 2002.

In the GAPTL, “local education support systems” refers to the full range of supports schools need to be successful for all students. These systems often include traditional district central offices but are also likely to encompass supports that some central offices either do not currently provide or functions that they do not or cannot perform well. Indeed, the Design Group does not assume that all of the functions listed here should be performed by district central offices; rather, it assumes that creating “school communities that work” may well require the involvement of other organizations and/or the development of other organizational arrangements.

II. All children can learn to much higher standards than they are now commonly held to, regardless of their race or ethnicity, family income, gender, primary language, or disability.

- Good instruction makes the goals for learning clear and comprehensible to students, parents, and the broader community.
- Good local education support systems
 - provide a core instructional framework that defines the knowledge and competencies students should acquire and that guides instruction;
 - make the obligations and rights of learners, families, and communities clear;
 - allocate resources such as materials, time, and staff assignments to advance the core instructional framework and to avoid diffuse, scattered improvement efforts;
 - require formative and summative assessments to be congruent with the learning goals laid out in the core instructional framework.

III. Learning is a complex process interrelated with all aspects of development, including cognitive, social, and emotional development.

- Good instruction
 - recognizes the emotional aspects of learning and thus helps establish
 - comfortable, efficient routines well-known to students;
 - norms that make learning a primary value in the classroom and school;
 - learning communities made up of adults and students who feel safe to take risks with each other, support each other’s learning, and work cooperatively;
 - draws out and draws on children’s cultural backgrounds and preconceptions;
 - builds on students’ knowledge and prior experiences by presenting them with “just manageable difficulties”; that is, activities or assignments that are challenging to students but not so hard as to be discouraging.
- Good local education support systems
 - recognize that policy implementation is also a process of teaching and learning and thus structure policies, contracts, and procedures to meet the developmental needs of their staff by making connections with other aspects of educators’ lives, drawing on their cultural backgrounds and preconceptions, and building on their knowledge and prior experiences;
 - have social norms that value the search for understanding and see errors as valuable sources for learning;
 - have staffs that model the kinds of positive relationships and continuous learning that they seek to develop in students;
 - encourage the development of strong teacher leadership and distributed leadership in schools.

IV. All children do not learn in the same ways or at the same pace.

- Good instruction
 - draws from a wide repertoire of teaching strategies to tailor instruction to the needs of different students;
 - relies on ongoing formative assessment data to inform students of their progress and to help identify the areas where further instruction and inquiry should be focused;
 - recognizes that learning is subject-sensitive—children don’t simply learn, they learn to dance, to paint, and to do mathe-

matics, to read and critique text, to build tables, and to write stories; *what* students are learning is an important variable in the learning process.

- Good local education support systems
 - offer differentiated supports based on the needs of particular students and schools;
 - recognize that it's not only children who vary in the ways they learn—adults also vary in the ways they learn. Thus, policies, contracts, and procedures should
 - be flexible enough to adapt to the varied conditions, capacities, and attitudes of school staffs;
 - allow flexibility in school organization and staff working conditions;
 - provide instructional supports that balance the need for teacher creativity and decision making with the need for some systemwide consistency and comparative assessment;
 - use data to inform decision making, interventions, and curricular and programmatic choices.

SOURCES

This document draws heavily from: National Research Council, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000).

Other sources include:

- Annenberg Institute for School Reform. *School Quality Review* (Providence, RI: Author, in press).
- Boston Plan for Excellence. *Focus on Children II: Focus on Results* (Boston, MA: Author, 2000).
- Brazelton, T. B., & Greenspan, S. I. *The Irreducible Needs of Children: What Every Child Must Have to Grow, Learn, and Flourish* (New York: Perseus Books, 2000).
- Keene, E. O., & Zimmerman, S. *The Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop* (Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, 1997).
- Newmann, F. M., Secada, W. G., and Wehlage, G. G. *A Guide to Authentic Instruction and Assessment: Vision, Standards and Scoring* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for Education Research, 1995).
- Pittman, K. J., & Cahill, M. *Pushing the Boundaries of Education: The Implications of a Youth Development Approach to Education Policies, Structures, and Collaborations* (Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers, 1992).

“multi-sided mirrors” in five key areas:

- recruiting, allocating, and retaining high-quality teachers and principals;
- providing professional development and supports that model and promote good instruction;
- developing and distributing instructional tools and resources;
- managing and supporting policies and practices that meet students' learning and developmental needs; and
- holding the central office and other district stakeholders accountable for results.

The Design Group has structured the COAT to make it manageable and to make the process of collecting data itself informative and useful in building capacity. Toward that end, the Group recommends that the district enlist an external group of “critical friends” to assist the central office in collecting the data, making sense of it, and choosing areas of focus. In addition, the process calls for significant dialogue among stakeholders within a district, which will help the participants understand—and be able to build upon—each other's skills.

For example, districts using the tool will, with the help of the external partners, convene focus groups of key constituents—including teachers, principals, student leaders, parents, union leaders, community leaders, reform support providers, and central office staff—who will reflect on or respond to data and share their views on and experiences of central office policies and practices in the five key areas. The groups will consider the state of student achievement in the district, the possible causes of the achievement patterns, the district's responses to those patterns, and evidence that the responses are working.



Assessing the Central Office: A Superintendent's View

Design Group member Vicki Phillips is superintendent of the School District of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, a small urban district that shares many of the characteristics of larger districts. Here she discusses why and how a central office assessment tool is useful.

WHY DO YOU FIND THE CENTRAL OFFICE ASSESSMENT TOOL VALUABLE?

Vicki Phillips: Any time you can provide a tool that enables a district to take a hard, focused, laser-like look at what it's doing is a good thing. But this particular tool is especially valuable. Often what happens when you get something to help you do an assessment, it pinpoints a specific area without looking at how things bump up against one another. One of the things I like about the COAT is that it helps you look at the whole, while providing enough depth to help you focus.

WOULD A DISTRICT BE WILLING TO ASSESS ITSELF IF THE RESULTS MAY NOT BE GOOD?

VP: A district like ours is willing to do that. We're not afraid of the results. We're looking for feedback along the way that will help us make midcourse adjustments. We're oriented toward continuous improvement.

It could tell us something we might not like, or something we're not tuned into. But that's valuable—it helps you make informed decisions about things you need to do. It can be scary for some districts. But I don't understand how you can improve if you have no way of looking at yourself.

HOW CAN THE TOOL CONTINUE TO BE REFINED TO MAKE IT MORE USEFUL?

VP: We need to craft it in a way that allows for multiple entry points. My district has a lot of the instructional pieces done, but we're struggling with some of the human resources issues. We would enter into it at a very different level than a district that is just coming to terms with being standards-based. That's okay, but it's a challenge in how you craft the tool.

Another challenge is coming up with ways to help districts use the information they get from the assessment. As important as the instrument is, what's more important is where the district is going with the feedback. Is there a way—for the Annenberg Institute or the team helping you do the assessment—to help the district broker additional information or find places that are already doing the work the assessment identifies?

It doesn't stop with delivering feedback. Implementing changes—that's where the rubber meets the road. It's one thing to get feedback; it's another to know where to go once you've gotten it. That's the \$64,000 question.

CREATING SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

Assessing a district central office's policies and practices obviously does not create capacity to support high-quality teaching and learning in schools. But knowing where the strengths and weaknesses lie is a critical first step. Acting on that information and implementing changes is, as one Design Group member put it, "where the rubber meets the road."

To make the COAT as effective as it can be, the Design Group will work with a handful of districts to test the tool

once it is ready later this year. These tests will show whether it is feasible, whether it provides useful information, and whether the process of collecting the data actually helps district central offices improve their operations. Over the next few years, the Design Group will work with collaborating districts on how to use the data effectively to strengthen their capacity to support schools.

The good news is that we know what high-quality teaching looks like. The challenge is to make it happen in every classroom.

Design Group on Building Capacity for Quality Teaching and Leadership

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About the School Communities that Work Task Force

The Design Group on Building Capacity for Quality Teaching and Leadership is one of three groups formed by School Communities that Work to help imagine what new school communities could look like and how to create them. The other design groups are examining issues around organizing and governing schools and school systems and developing family and community supports. Each of the groups is crafting models and tools that can be tried out in partner school systems.

School Communities that Work: A Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts was launched in 2000 by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University with funding from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Pew Charitable Trusts, and the Ford and Rockefeller foundations. Its goals are to help create, support, and sustain high-achieving schools across entire urban communities and to stimulate a national conversation to promote the development and implementation of school communities that do, in fact, work for all children.