Commissioned by

The Wallace Foundation®

Supporting ideas.
Sharing solutions.
Expanding opportunities.®

Learning-focused Leadership and Leadership Support: Meaning and Practice in Urban Systems

Michael S. Knapp, Michael A. Copland, Meredith I. Honig, Margaret L. Plecki, Bradley S. Portin

University of Washington

August 2010

ctp

Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

The Study of Leadership for Learning Improvement

With support from The Wallace Foundation, a team of researchers from the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy at the University of Washington has undertaken an investigation of leadership in urban schools and districts that are seeking to improve both learning and leadership. The study explored the following overarching question: *What does it take for leaders to promote and support powerful, equitable learning in a school and in the district and state system that serves the school?* The study pursued this question through a set of coordinated investigations, each with an intensive qualitative or mixed-methods strategy and with overlapping samples, designed to offer images of what is possible in schools and districts that take learning improvement seriously. Study sites were chosen to reflect a focus on learning and leadership improvement and varying degrees of progress toward improvement goals.

- **School Leadership investigation:** The reconfiguration and exercise of leadership within elementary, middle, and high schools to enable more focused support for learning improvement

- **Resource Investment investigation:** The investment of staffing and other resources at multiple levels of the system, in alignment with learning improvement goals, to enhance equity and leadership capacity

- **Central Office Transformation investigation:** The reinvention of central office work practices and relationships with the schools to better support districtwide improvement of teaching and learning

Separate reports detail the findings of each investigation, and a synthesis report identifies themes connecting the three study strands.

Learning-focused Leadership and Leadership Support: Meanings and Practice in Urban Systems (synthesis report)
By Michael S. Knapp, Michael A. Copland, Meredith I. Honig, Margaret L. Plecki, and Bradley S. Portin

Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools
By Bradley S. Portin, Michael S. Knapp, Scott Dareff, Sue Feldman, Felice A. Russell, Catherine Samuelson, and Theresa Ling Yeh, with the assistance of Chrysan Gallucci and Judy Swanson

How Leaders Invest Staffing Resources for Learning Improvement
By Margaret L. Plecki, Michael S. Knapp, Tino Castañeda, Tom Halverson, Robin LaSota, and Chad Lochmiller

Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement
By Meredith I. Honig, Michael A. Copland, Lydia Rainey, Juli Anna Lorton, and Morena Newton, with the assistance of Elizabeth Matson, Liza Pappas, and Bethany Rogers

Contents

Introduction
The Challenges of Learning-focused Leadership in Urban Schools and Districts

Picture the challenge of urban education from the vantage point of a new school principal, committed to making education work for the students in his charge. This account describes a principal's own reflections years afterward on the struggles he faced in working with his staff to improve instruction:

> …Early on, [the new principal] tried to address the isolation and lack of teamwork among teachers. He tried to focus staff meetings on instruction, published a school newsletter that was largely about teaching, and revised the schedule so the teachers teaching the same grade level had the same preparation time and, later, a weekly 90-minute team meeting. [But as the principal later reflected] "Morale never seemed to get out of the basement. Staff meetings gravitated to student discipline problems." In team meetings, "there was a strong tendency for the agendas to be dominated by field trips, war stories about troubled students, and other management issues, with little attention to using student work and data to fine-tune teaching." Almost inevitably, teacher pessimism was a significant barrier. "Discouraged by the visible results of poverty and having never seen an urban school that produces very high student achievement, many teachers found it hard to believe that it could be done. They regarded themselves as hardworking martyrs in a hopeless cause…."[1]

The staff in question composed hardworking, largely veteran professionals, caught up in a cycle of demoralization and ineffective practice that their circumstances had fostered for many years. Above all, the school was unable to focus on the core matters of teaching and learning. One committed, energetic principal walking in the door was not about to change these circumstances. Though describing events that transpired more than a decade ago, this account speaks for many contemporary schools and many well-meaning school leaders, as they struggle to improve the quality of education for young people in urban schools.

Now add to the scenario the heightened expectations of high-stakes accountability, along with calls for educational practice that is data-based, the prospect of diminished resources, and an increasingly diverse population of students, many of whom enter school speaking a first language other than English. We visited a setting such

as this in the course of our research and asked a new third-grade teacher, barely two months into her first year of teaching in a challenging inner city elementary school, to talk about where she and others in the school were focusing their efforts at learning improvement. Without hesitation, she answered as follows:

> Okay, the priorities for learning. I believe that, well, first of all, in terms of subject, I believe reading, writing, and math are the utmost importance for the school. I believe that [the leadership team] speaks about differentiating our instruction to reach all kinds of learners, no matter what level they are at and no matter how they learn, what modality they learn by. We really want to collect data, make sure that everything is assessment-based so that we can see where they stand and what progress, if any, they are making. That is pretty much what I have been told by the school, which I think is exactly what we need to do….[2]

Her answer communicates a wholly different image of the working ethos of the school she is in. Instead of demoralization, she communicates hope, clarity of purpose, and confidence. Her words express a sense of school-wide commitment and direction. It is clear that a leadership team has consistently communicated to her a productive way to think about her work and that of others in the school. This teacher's emerging view of the work ahead attends to the differences among school children and to a finely tuned way of teaching them, based in evidence about their progress. In short, she owns the goal of learning improvement and she has a sense of how to get there. Her response and other things we learned about this school give further clues about the sources of her view of her responsibilities, among them:

■ *The school's leadership team placed priority on knowing the students as individuals*—as both learners and members of a cultural community.

■ *A school-wide learning improvement "agenda" was in place*—a set of improvement goals generated and communicated by a leadership team, led by the principal and including assistant principals and several teacher leaders.

■ *Regular instructional support was available to all teachers, especially novices,* offered by administrative leaders and several others in the school who had assumed newly reconfigured roles that offer instructional leadership.

■ *The school had devised its own system for tracking students' progress and for making regular adjustments in their learning experiences,* based on measures of

their progress, that incorporated district tracking measures and other data the school found useful.

- *School staff shared responsibility for student progress,* reflected in a set of agreements as well as unspoken norms among school staff, to assume such responsibility and to accept that all will be answerable for their efforts to accomplish this goal.

Digging a little deeper takes one beyond this school's leadership, norms, and data systems to the larger district and state system in which the school sits. Several features of that environment further explain what has happened at this school:

- *The district central office had placed priority on assisting school principals in becoming strong instructional leaders,* while also helping the principal attend to other aspects of the management of the school.

- *The district reform plan granted the principal significant discretion (and some additional discretionary resources)* to define and deploy staff in ways that optimally support instruction and to access resources for professional development. The principal had made use of this discretion to configure her leadership team and engage several external partners to help address particular instructional improvement issues.

- *Clear system-wide improvement expectations had been communicated from both the district and state* that set direction and lent urgency to the school's efforts on behalf of its students, an urgency this principal accepts and leverages in her dealings with her staff.

This school's scenario differs from the first image of demoralized school staff unable to engage questions of improving teaching and learning. Not surprisingly, the second school showed clear evidence of student learning growth, where the first did not.

The second scenario raises numerous questions about what is at work and how it got to be that way. *While many things are involved, at the root of them is the exercise of leadership—by many people at different levels of the system—that brings focus, resources, and effort to the task of learning improvement.* At first glance, it is tempting to conclude that the committed, energetic principal of the second school is the primary explanation for the difference in the two schools, but to do so would miss the point (after all, the first school had one such leader as

well). Such an assumption would miss, among other things, that others inside the school share in the leadership work, some more visibly than others. And it would miss leadership at other levels of the system that empowers and guides the work of educators in the school. Finally, it would miss the distinction that *all these leaders are **themselves** supported and led* in ways that focus *their* energy and attention productively on the improvement of teaching and learning.

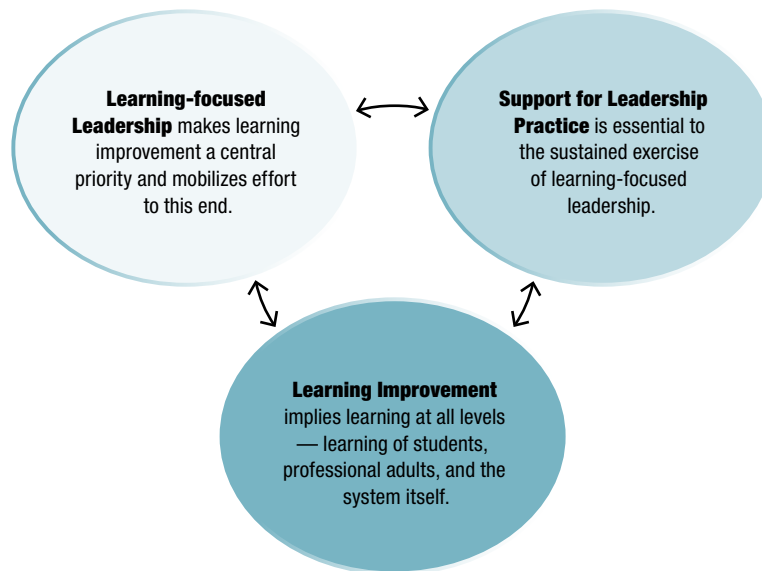## The Study of Leadership for Learning Improvement

Research is beginning to probe the kind of leadership revealed in the second scenario. This report summarizes what the authors learned from a multi-strand investigation, the Study of Leadership for Learning Improvement, that adds to the understanding of this realm of educational leadership. Together, the three study strands in our research shed light on the questions: *What makes the leadership of urban districts and schools most likely to contribute to learning improvement? To what extent, and how, do different leadership activities, structures, and practices focus others on an improvement agenda and mobilize efforts in this pursuit? Who or what supports leaders who are working to improve the quality of teaching and learning? What does that "leadership support" entail?*

In approaching these questions, our research was guided by an overarching set of ideas we refer to as "learning-focused leadership," and that others have described as "learning-centered leadership" or "leadership for learning."[3] Our particular take on this way of characterizing leadership work focuses attention on *powerful, equitable learning* among students and professionals and within the system as a whole.[4] And, as we show in Figure 1 on page 5, both are connected to the idea of leadership support.

"Leadership" we define as the *shared work and commitments that shape the direction of a school or district and their learning improvement agendas, and that engage effort and energy in pursuit of those agendas*. We distinguish "leadership" from "leaders" and from "roles" or "positions," though the latter are instrumental in achieving the former and, as such, figure prominently in our research.

Across all, we paid special attention to what is generally referred to as "instructional leadership"—which we treat as intentional efforts at all levels of an educational system to guide, direct, or support teachers as they seek to increase

Figure 1. Three Connected Ideas

Learning-focused Leadership makes learning improvement a central priority and mobilizes effort to this end.

Support for Leadership Practice is essential to the sustained exercise of learning-focused leadership.

Learning Improvement implies learning at all levels — learning of students, professional adults, and the system itself.

their repertoire of skills, gain professional knowledge, and ultimately improve their students' success. We thus subsume within this term much more than conventional images of instructional leadership that concentrate on individuals providing assistance or guidance to teachers, as in the school principal or literacy coach engaged in what amounts to "instructional coaching" or "clinical supervision." Rather, we are concerned about the full range of activities, carried out by various educators, that offer teachers ideas, assistance, or moral support specifically directed at instruction and that urge or even compel teachers to try to improve. We further assume that instructional leadership *is inherently distributed* among different staff in the school building and across levels of the system—that is, more than one kind of individual or unit are influencing teachers' work, whether or not they recognize and coordinate their respective efforts.

The Study of Leadership for Learning Improvement took a close look at three facets of learning-focused leadership in urban systems. The study strands all relied heavily on qualitative inquiry strategies conducted over a year and a half (the 2007–08 school year and the beginning of the following year) through repeated visits to seven moderate- to large-sized urban districts and to a selected set of 15 schools within them (see Methodological Notes, page 35, for a more detailed description of study methods and design). The research teams for the three study strands accumulated hundreds of interviews, many observations of leadership

events, and numerous archival sources that shed light on the leadership issues under investigation. The study strands investigated learning-focused leadership and how it is supported from three vantage points:

- *The investment of staffing and other resources in support of equitable learning improvement.* This study strand examined decisions made by district- and school-level leaders concerning the improvement of teaching and learning and the dynamics of doing so when increasing equity was a goal.[5]

- *The development and exercise of distributed instructional leadership within the school.* This study strand profiled the activities of the full range of staff in the school engaged in leadership aimed at teaching and learning, both those in administrative positions (principals, assistant principals) and others exercising teacher leadership, either formally or informally, while also detailing the central role that principals play in this distributed leadership work.[6]

- *The transformation of central office work practices and the district-school relationship to develop and sustain instructional leadership capacity.* This study strand concentrated on the daily work of administrators throughout the central office as they transformed their work practices to help build principals' capacity for instructional leadership.[7]

The three study strands examined these matters within districts and schools where leaders were engaged in proactive attempts to address learning-focused leadership issues. All three study strands focused on two district sites (Atlanta Public Schools and the New York City/Empowerment Schools Organization)[8] and selected schools within them. Each study strand added to these sites one or two others—Portland and Eugene, OR (for investment analyses); Springfield, MA, and Norwalk-La Mirada, CA (for school leadership analyses); and Oakland, CA (for central office transformation analyses). Together, the study sites offered a wide range of contexts, all of which were making learning improvement a high priority, displaying promising practices and structures, and showing some evidence of progress (locally defined) in educating a diverse, impoverished urban population.

Despite the differences in the samples and in our approaches to studying them, the three study strands offer complementary insights into the exercise of learning-focused leadership and how it is guided and supported. Two sets of themes emerged from the study findings. The first concerned the practice of learning-focused leadership and what it meant to bring it to bear in a more compelling way

on instructional improvement. The second concerned the ways in which learning-focused leaders were themselves supported. And, as suggested schematically in Figure 2 below, leadership support was integrally connected to the practice of learning-focused leadership, and vice versa.

Figure 2. Learning-focused Leadership Practice and Leadership Support in the Service of Learning Improvement
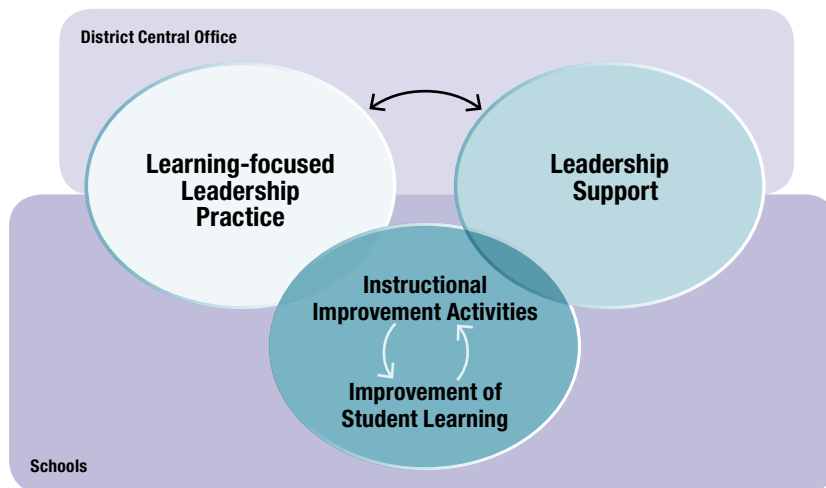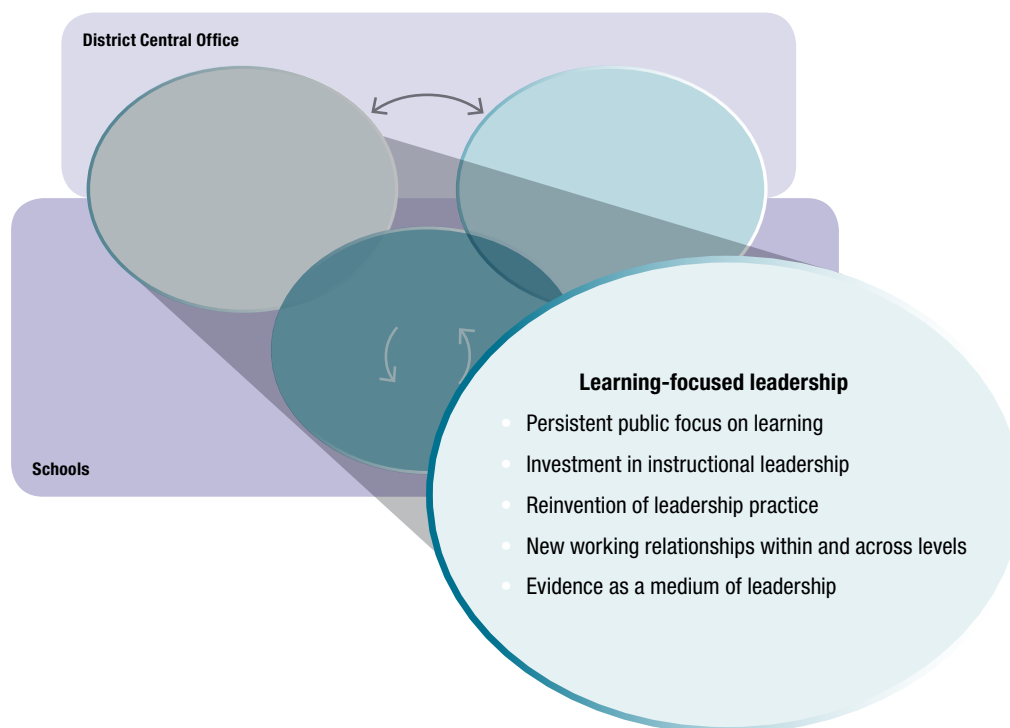

The Practice of Learning-focused Leadership

In these districts and schools, focusing leadership on the improvement of learning—*everyone's* learning—meant several things at once. First of all, almost by definition, the improvement of teaching and learning became the business of the school and district, and those exercising leadership in central office positions or within the schools were relentless in communicating this message. Second, to make this message more than a rhetorical exercise, they purposefully invested resources—all kinds of resources—not just money (and often not much money), but also time, materials, expertise, and even autonomy in this pursuit, with a special emphasis on instructional leadership as a primary target of investment. Third, they sought to reinvent leadership work practice so that teaching and learning improvement stayed at the center of everyone's attention and efforts. Fourth, they created new kinds of relationships within and between levels that resulted in better coordination of effort and attended to particular improvement needs which

differed from school to school, teacher to teacher, or leader to leader. And finally, they made evidence of many kinds a medium of leadership work and a constant reference point in their interactions with teachers, each other, and stakeholders. Next we briefly describe these facets of leadership practice, highlighted in Figure 3 below, in light of what the study strands learned.

Figure 3. Central Practices of Learning-focused Leadership

District Central Office

Schools

Learning-focused leadership
- Persistent public focus on learning
- Investment in instructional leadership
- Reinvention of leadership practice
- New working relationships within and across levels
- Evidence as a medium of leadership

1. Learning-focused leadership means a persistent, public focus at all levels of the educational system on improving the quality of instruction.

Not surprisingly, given the way we selected study sites, the districts and schools we studied made the improvement of teaching and learning a major emphasis, *but the degree to which learning improvement goals were owned and internalized by educational leaders at various levels of the system was striking.* In turn, these leaders projected a persistent, public focus on learning improvement, which reinforced the ownership of the message.

First of all, it should be understood that in an era of high-stakes accountability, actors throughout the system would be paying close attention to measures of student achievement and to the consequences that flow from high and low performance on these measures. But doing so can become an exercise in compliance and regulation, more than a matter of professional commitment and daily practice, and educators can easily lose sight of learning goals. Here are some of the manifestations we saw of leaders communicating and internalizing a focus on learning improvement at school and district levels:

■ *District leaders were communicating clear expectations for learning improvement.* School leaders, on their part, were internalizing these messages, though often giving additional meaning to desired learning improvements (e.g., as more than the test-score improvements called for by the system).

■ *School leaders were making use of the district's (and state's) commitment to learning improvement as a lever for accomplishing improvement goals in the school.* Specifically, these leaders leveraged district or state accountability requirements as a tool in their pursuit of the school's learning improvement agenda.

■ *Learning improvement messages from both district and school were being further internalized in **within-school** accountability systems* that held school staff jointly responsible for student learning.

■ Especially in the districts committed to central office transformation strategies, *district reform initiatives were developing a different working culture across the central office (and often a different organization of units, roles, and work) that placed primary emphasis on improving teaching and learning in schools.* On their part, district-level staff members in various positions were beginning to orient their daily work to this expectation.

In sum, across all levels in the sites we studied, it was clear that improving student learning was the main business of the school and district. School-based educators perceived the whole system, themselves included, to be about learning improvement. Recall the new third grade teacher with which this report began: Her understanding of the priorities for learning in her school, transmitted to her by her school leadership team and reinforced by district leaders' explicit expectations, was a natural consequence of a persistent, public focus on learning improvement.

2. Learning-focused leadership means investing in people and positions within and across schools whose primary work is instructional leadership.

A priority on learning improvement is one thing to assert, and another to enact. A central aspect of leaders' work at various levels of the systems we studied was decisions about staffing resources, as well as related resources (e.g., money, time, expertise), that put people in position to carry out instructional leadership work.

As they allocated staffing and other resources for learning improvement, leaders often thought of themselves as "investing" resources—that is, they took a long-term view of their efforts to support learning improvement and looked for returns on their investment over time. An elementary principal who had found a way to assign two certificated teachers to each of his kindergarten through second grade classrooms articulated this idea clearly:

> A lot of people think I'm crazy and ask: How can you possibly afford it? It's a long-term investment. I really believe strongly that this is going to help those kids—that I don't have to have after-school programs and Saturday programs and test prep programs and this or that program for 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders, which is really not going to merit much gain….I think by making the investment in the early grades, I'm making an investment that's going to pay off in the long run, and I think I'll see it on the other end….

To facilitate investment in learning improvement, districts established "investment frameworks" that specified where initiative for improvement activity lay and the degree of flexibility, responsibility, and discretion that resided at each level of the system. School leaders like the one speaking above operated within a framework that emphasized school-level autonomy; yet even his counterparts in other districts, operating under more centralizing investment frameworks, were nonetheless thinking and acting with a long-term approach to resources.

A broader set of investment decisions, made at the central office level, directed staffing and other resources to learning improvement goals and to the task of building human capacity for instructional leadership. An especially common first step in this regard was to build a cadre of people engaged in instructional leadership within and also across schools. Here, some districts allocated a category of positions serving multiple schools—for example, the 42 "Model Teacher Leaders" in Atlanta, each of whom worked with a particular network of schools.

Alternatively, other districts invested more indirectly in instructional leadership by creating a "market" for cross-school instructional leadership support, as in the New York City/Empowerment Schools arrangement, where principals purchased the support services of a Network Team, experienced administrators on call to assist the school with instructional and operational matters. The net effect of this latter arrangement was to put in place a cadre of staff positioned to exercise instructional leadership across schools.

An underlying commitment to equity prompted district and school leaders on numerous occasions to make *differential* investments, allocating a proportionately greater—hence, an unequal—share of staffing or other resources to students, class-rooms, schools, or other units that exhibited greater needs. These equity-focused investments were of different types, but regardless of type, they often generated a predictable "pushback" from internal or external stakeholders who saw their advantages eroding or somehow compromised. To manage the politics of this pushback, leaders often needed to go to great lengths, engaging in equity-focused political work that played out across a long-term timeframe.

The net effect of these investments was to put in place staff who engaged solely or centrally in instructional leadership work, some within a single school, others across schools. Two patterns were especially noteworthy.

The proliferation of individuals engaged in within-school instructional leadership.[9] Within schools, a striking number and variety of individuals exercised instructional leadership, in addition to the school principal or any assistant principals whose work was explicitly instructionally focused, under arrangements that allocated some portion of their assignment to leadership work. While titles varied (e.g., literacy, math, or technology coach; instructional liaison specialist; demonstration teacher; assessment coordinator or data specialist), as did the proportion of their assignment devoted to instructional leadership and classroom teaching or other duties, these "learning-focused teacher leaders" provided the bulk of the within-house professional development, offered one-on-one instructional coaching to classroom teachers, and engaged in various forms of work with evidence and inquiry related to the school's improvement goals. Typically more than one such person exercised instructional leadership within each school, and in the larger schools (e.g., elementary schools serving more than 1,000 students), eight or more individuals might comprise the school's instructional leadership cadre.

The dedication of specific central office staff, sometimes supplemented by staff from third-party organizations, to help school leaders strengthen their instructional leadership. Investment in a cross-school instructional leadership cadre took several forms. Under some arrangements, district central office staff (e.g., specialists from other units concerned with curriculum or professional development) and an external organization working with the central office (e.g., consultants with expertise in a particular subject area such as literacy) offered group-based professional development for school administrators, teacher leaders, or classroom teachers, alongside some individual instructional coaching of teachers, often in demonstration mode, so that other teachers might learn, too.

Alternatively, and especially in the three districts seeking to transform their central offices, the district invested in new central office positions dedicated to strengthening principals' instructional leadership though one-on-one partnership work with school principals or interaction with them in networked groups. In two of the three transforming districts we studied, this cadre of central office staff (who we collectively referred to as "Instructional Leadership Directors")[10] was supplemented by a small team of administrators (such as Atlanta's Model Teacher Leaders, noted previously) who helped with the instructional leadership work.

3. Learning-focused leadership means reinventing leadership practice within schools and the central office.

The work of the instructional leadership cadre, both within and across schools, is often new, ambiguous, and difficult. It calls on a knowledge base and skill set that many educators, no matter how accomplished in teaching and administrative or support roles, have not fully developed or even conceived. In a fundamental sense, the school and district educators we studied had to *reinvent* their leadership practice, in varying degrees, to provide effective forms of instructional leadership. This process was most visible in the work of school-based teacher leaders and the central office administrators who interfaced most directly with schools and school principals, but it was also visible for many principals and other supervisory leaders, who came to a new understanding of what "instructional leadership" meant for their daily work.

Learning-focused teacher leaders. Teachers who came to exercise instructional leadership in schools were uniquely positioned for this work. Though some schools had a history of using content-area coaches, in few instances did a school

staff have a template for understanding what the teacher leaders were supposed to do and where they fit in the organization. Operating in between the school principal and the classrooms, teacher leaders developed their leadership practice on several fronts.

First of all, they became part of an instructional leadership team, and therein figured out how their different strengths might complement those of other team members in pursuit of the school's learning improvement agenda. Then, in inter-action with others in the school, they negotiated their middle ground position in which they often acted as a bridge between the classroom and the school's super-visory leaders (though they were not part of the supervisory process), or even between the classroom and the larger learning improvement agenda of the district. Finally, assuming they were able to establish a good working relationship with classroom teachers—not a foregone conclusion, as they often faced resistance ini-tially—they engaged classroom teachers in identifying and addressing problems of instructional practice.

Principals and other school-based supervisory leaders. Working in collabora-tion with the teacher leaders, but in different ways, the school principal and other supervisory leaders (e.g., assistant principals who took on instructional support as a central part of their practice) faced often unfamiliar aspects of their jobs as well, even though they might have engaged in instructional leadership in the past. In this regard, their leadership practice was exercised in somewhat different ways from the teacher leaders, in several arenas.

To begin with, supervisory leaders in the school had to lay the groundwork for learning improvement by assembling a high-quality staff, establishing and articu-lating a school-wide learning improvement agenda, and building school-wide trust and a culture among school staff that emphasized the need to join forces, work in teams, and develop collaborative solutions to the challenges facing the school. Though they did connect individually with teachers in a variety of ways, the capac-ity of supervisory leaders to "reach" classroom practice was greatly augmented to the extent they could forge, and *work through*, a viable instructional leadership *team,* rather than as a collection of individuals who exercised instructional leader-ship without knowledge of, or coordination with, each others' efforts.

Central office staff who worked directly with school principals. Though not positioned in the school, the central office staff whose purpose was to help school principals improve their instructional leadership worked one-on-one with a small number of principals and with the same administrators in networked groups,

while offering group-based assistance to these principals. Especially evident in the districts seeking to transform their central offices, the activities of these staff, in varying degrees, displayed leadership practices well established by theory and research in other sectors as likely to support professional learning, among them:[11]

■ *Modeling ways of thinking and acting as an instructional leader,* such as demonstrating how to have challenging conversations with teachers while reflecting on the demonstrations to help leaders see what was modeled and why.

■ *Developing and using tools in one-on-one assistance relationships,* such as teaching and learning frameworks or protocols that guide the use of data and evidence in instructional improvement.

Not all participants came ready to do this work, but regardless of their backgrounds, central office staff spent a great deal of time, individually and collectively, figuring out how to allocate and spend its time productively with school leaders.

Others in the system engaged in comparable efforts to discover or reinvent how their work could be oriented more specifically and directly toward the improvement of teaching and learning. Once again, in the districts emphasizing central office transformation, staff and units not involved in direct daily interaction with schools (e.g., the Human Resources department or units responsible for facilities) were mining the evidence emerging from the direct assistance relationships described previously, as well as from other sources, for insights into how they could improve their performance in relation to instructional improvement goals.

4. Learning-focused leadership means differentiated, responsive relationships within schools and between schools and the central office.

The new forms of leadership practice just described imply a pattern of connection among district, school, and classroom that differs from typical practice in large school districts in two respects. First, most of the districts we studied placed emphasis on *differentiating* their approach to particular schools and school leaders to maximize their ability to help each school leader improve his or her practice. Similarly, within schools, supervisory leaders were often seeking a more informal and tailored way of interacting with particular teachers or other school staff than would normally occur in supervisory relations. Second, the relationships within

schools, and between them and the central office, were intended to be more two-way and more responsive than is often the case in school systems. This showed up in our sites in several ways.

More differentiated and responsive central office-school relationships. Most dramatically seen in districts committed to fundamental transformation of the central office, both the design and the practice of the relations between central office administrators and school principals featured a differentiated approach to each school's unique needs, interests, and challenges, combined with increased access to central office resources. In the Atlanta Public Schools transformation design, for example, the newly created School Reform Team (SRT) offered a streamlined and accessible main point of contact between a designated network of schools and other central office units. On its part, the SRT targeted particular and often different learning improvement needs within each of the schools in its network.

More responsive supervisor-teacher relationships inside the school. Within the school, the attempts by supervisory leaders to redefine supervision indicated a shift toward greater responsiveness. This shift moved the relationship between the teacher and their supervisors from the annual formal, summative exercise to a more elaborated relationship involving various formal and informal interactions, mostly more formative than summative, intended to generate conversations about instruction and also to keep supervisory leaders well informed about what was happening in classrooms.

5. Learning-focused leaders use evidence of many kinds as a main medium of leadership work and a constant reference point in their interaction with teachers, each other, and stakeholders.

Data of various kinds, such as assessments, environmental surveys, student work, counts of work completion or behavioral issues, occupied a prominent place in the leadership practice and working relationships described above. A series of intentional actions by leaders at all levels sought to make evidence about instruction, learning, leadership, or surrounding conditions a medium of conversation concerning learning improvement, as well as a device for improving instruction itself. Naturally enough, the test score data featured by state and district accountability systems occupied a central place in the data use story, but the districts and

schools we studied went beyond this evidence source to develop a far richer form of evidence-informed practice.

To actively encourage teaching and leadership that was informed by evidence, the states and districts we studied invested heavily in data infrastructure, data literacy, and new forms of data and evidence. Resources for this purpose were invested in various ways, among them, to set up online assessment systems that facilitated user access to assessment results, establish district- and school-level positions to help users learn how to understand and use data sources, institute survey measures for capturing feedback on school climate or leadership work, and create observational protocols and other data-focused tools to guide instructional leadership efforts in the schools.

The work of central office administrators with school principals both facilitated the principals' use of evidence and, at the same time, became an evidence source for improving practice in other parts of the central office. In a straightforward way, the central office staff members who worked most directly with school principals to strengthen their instructional leadership were often in a good position to help school principals or others get smarter about what data might be saying about their schools' performance. A principal comments on how useful this could be:

> There's also benefit to the data work that we did in our network meetings that I immediately took…straight to my staff and had really meaningful conversations about data, about the benchmark assessments, about line item analysis, about looking at this data and how to use this data to inform what we're doing and make decisions. And a lot of that is…easier to do as a result of the work that we're doing in network meetings. We do it anyway, but it just helps get other protocols and other systems where they're analyzing it and just approaching it differently with our staff. So I get professional development there.

This kind of teaching about evidence use also happened in the context of one-on-one assistance relationships, in relation to any problem of leadership practice that data potentially informed. At the same time that school leaders were gaining facility with data through these encounters, the resulting information about each school's progress, struggles, and improvement work provided the rest of the central office with an important feedback source that it would not otherwise have had.

On their part, *principals made use of the data furnished to them by the districts (and the new learning about how to work with it) to both focus and anchor their*

improvement work. Furthermore, in many instances, they took the matter one step further, by creating within-school data systems that provided continual feedback loops to teachers, teacher leaders, and the school's supervisory leaders. A principal describes her version of such a system:

> We are a data-driven school….The data are used to drive the instruction, to make sure that students who are not performing are receiving remediation in order to get to where they should be. Now [the facilitator] and [my instructional liaison specialist] look more at the "target tracker" and our "red alert" forms that are turned in weekly, which show student progress….They're assessment documents documenting where the children are, what interventions are being used to help move them, if they are performing [low], where they should be on certain standards….Red alerts alert us to see which students are having weaknesses, and as I stated, teachers are to provide interventions or strategies to help move them forward.

Not all schools created such elaborate data systems. In some instances, the "system" only consisted of a Scantron machine that enabled the school to get instant access to all the required assessments across the year, without having to wait for the sometimes lengthy processing by the district central office or outside vendors. But whatever the arrangement and routines, school principals tried in various ways to have data become a medium of school-based educators' interactions over issues of learning improvement. That happened throughout the schools we studied, sometimes approximating an inquiry cycle (in some instances guided by central office staff), but other times consisting of an attempt to interrogate the data for clues about how to improve teaching and learning.
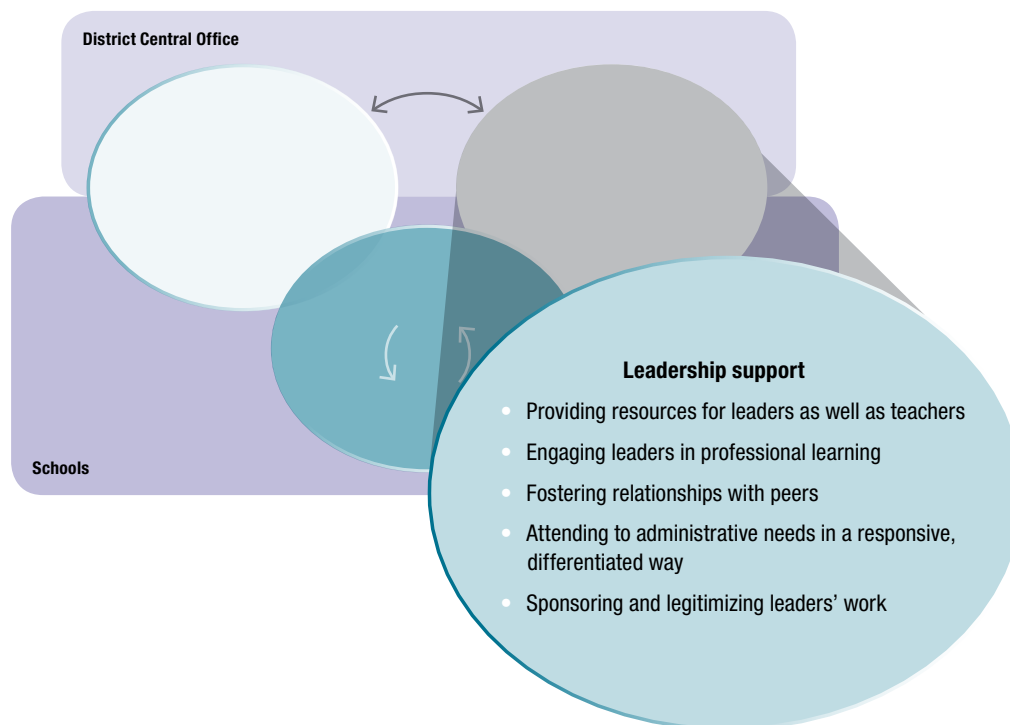
Teacher leaders found data to be a particularly useful entry point into instructional conversations with teachers, who were often reluctant initially to accept or engage in a relationship with a person occupying a middle-ground position in the school. Teacher leaders often found they could redirect teachers' attention from a defensive posture or self-conscious worry about their inadequacies toward a problem-solving process that took specific student learning issues or hard-to-teach curricular topics as the starting point for conversation. Teacher leaders were also in a position to decipher assessment data results for teachers who didn't understand what the district data system was sending them.

Sources and Forms of Leadership Support

In one sense, the five sets of learning-focused leadership practices discussed previously took teachers, teaching, and student learning as their primary reference point—after all, instructional leadership is about improving instruction. But the route for reaching teachers and instruction often lay *through* other leaders' work. Because of this, school and district leaders in the systems we studied were simultaneously engaged in multiple forms of *leadership support*, alongside or as part of learning-focused leadership practice. In other words, they didn't take for granted that teacher leaders, school principals, or central office staff would know how to lead effectively or would have the means and legitimacy to engage others in learning improvement. As a consequence, *explicit and focused support for leadership work was intrinsic to learning-focused leadership.* Most important, the steps taken to support learning-focused leadership were themselves leadership acts, essential dimensions of a leadership system that guided the improvement of teaching and learning.

"Support" meant different things to leaders who occupied varying positions within the educational system, and so the task of supporting learning-focused leadership reflected certain activities and arrangements, suggested schematically by Figure 4.

Figure 4. Activities and Arrangements for Supporting Learning-focused Leadership

District Central Office

Schools

Leadership support

- Providing resources for leaders as well as teachers
- Engaging leaders in professional learning
- Fostering relationships with peers
- Attending to administrative needs in a responsive, differentiated way
- Sponsoring and legitimizing leaders' work

New teacher leaders in a school, for example, faced challenges that were different from central office personnel managers; principals and instructional coaches, likewise, had different work to do, in the service of instructional improvement. That said, across the districts and schools we studied, some common sources and forms of leadership support were apparent, each attending to a different set of support needs. Five forms of leadership support, summarized in Table 1, were especially noticeable:

Table 1. Leadership Support Activities

Leadership Support Activities	Nature of Leadership Report
1. **Providing resources to enable leaders to sustain their instructional improvement work** (e.g., by making funds, expert consultants, or materials available to enable leaders to pursue their leadership agendas)	Material and financial support
2. **Creating and facilitating regular opportunities for leaders' professional learning** about their leadership work as well as about instructional improvement (e.g., by creating study groups, workshops, and regular meetings)	Formal support for professional learning, mentoring support, intellectual support
3. **Brokering relations with leaders' peers and colleagues engaged in similar work** (e.g., by facilitating interactions among networks of principals, coaches, or central office staff engaged in similar work)	Social-emotional support, informal support for professional learning
4. **Responding in a coordinated and timely way to administrative, legal, political, or logistical issues facing the school administrators** (e.g., by creating one-stop-shopping systems for school principals to get help with management issues)	Operational support, trouble-shooting or crisis management
5. **Sponsoring and legitimizing learning-focused leadership** (e.g., by giving visible political support to staff occupying new and unfamiliar positions)	Political and organizational support, directional support

These leadership support activities and the forms of support they provide interrelate in many ways—regular professional development meetings can also serve as a location for fostering peer networks; crisis management assistance can turn into an occasion for new professional learning; and so on. Nonetheless, it is helpful to consider one at a time what these different facets of leadership support entail and the forms they can take in practice.

1. Supporting learning-focused leadership means providing various resources to enable leaders to sustain their instructional improvement work.

Supporting learning-focused leadership means, among other things, providing leaders with the resources that enable sustained attention to instructional improvement. The initial investment in staff engaged in instructional leadership, mentioned previously, was only a first step. Beyond that, in the daily exercise of leadership, school and district leaders needed time, expertise related to particular problems of instructional practice, small amounts of funds for stipends or substitutes, and sufficient autonomy to experiment within a framework of agreed-upon expectations for results. The resource supports that our informants judged essential to their work varied by their positioning in the system, for example:

- *Resources provided to teacher leaders:* Scheduled time in the work week to interact with others in the school building's instructional leadership team or for organized engagement with groups of teachers; funds to support participation in courses or other outside events; or access to appropriate materials for coaching work.

- *Resources provided to supervisory leaders in schools:* Funds and/or full-time equivalents to use in hiring instructional support staff or others needed to support classroom teachers' work; autonomy or flexibility in using the school budget for instructional improvement purposes; data of various kinds on school performance, climate, participation; or observational tools (like walk-through protocols) to help focus and expand instructional supervision work.

- *Resources provided to central office staff who work most directly with the schools:* Time for interaction among team members working with the same set of schools or instructional frameworks, cycle-of-inquiry protocols, and other data-based tools used in interactions with school principals.

The districts and schools we studied differed in how much they were able to provide leaders; some were in better financial shape than others, and resource requests were not always met. But the important thing was that the sites we studied made special efforts to attend to individual leaders' varied resource needs at whatever level and, where possible, to respond to those needs on a differentiated basis.

2. Regular occasions for leaders to engage in their own professional learning are an essential support for learning-focused leadership.

The leaders we got to know in this study were learners, and they thought of themselves that way—in part, because the system in which they worked provided them with regular opportunities to enhance their learning about instruction itself and how it could be better and simultaneously about instructional leadership work. For example:

■ Teacher leaders and supervisory administrators in several schools used regular classroom walk-throughs as a way of sharpening each others' capacity to grasp what was happening in classroom instruction and where it could be improved.

■ In several districts, regular one-on-one sessions with central office staff provided principals with opportunities for feedback and modeling of good instructional leadership practice.

■ Weekly meetings of central office staff members who worked directly with schools created a facilitated forum for examining their own work as district-based leaders and considering ways to improve it.

These kinds of activities served as a source of ideas for alternative ways of approaching certain aspects of the leadership work, offered direct teaching of leadership techniques (e.g., through modeling of leadership practices and reflective debriefing of the observed modeling), and provided leaders with a regular opportunity to diagnose problems of their leadership practice. Various kinds of people could facilitate these forms of professional learning support, including experienced administrators from the central office, external consultants, and expert colleagues or administrators within a school building.

3. Facilitating relationships among peers and colleagues doing similar work provides support for learning-focused leadership.

The potential of relationships with peers to offer various kinds of support for learning-focused leadership was amply demonstrated in the schools and districts we studied. Here, while the support was often formally arranged or encouraged, it also occurred as a natural by-product of regular interaction among people who

faced the same problems of practice and were eager to pick each others' brains, share frustrations, or otherwise stay in touch with new possibilities. Peer support through network arrangements in several districts linked sets of 20 to 25 schools together and convened principals, as well as other groups with similar roles (assistant principals, coaches) at regular intervals. Access to colleagues engaged in similar leadership work (specialists, coaches, instructionally oriented assistant principals) also happened within schools. In these instances, colleagues were often organized to provide a kind of mutual support system for each others' instructional improvement efforts. Participants in these support systems offered willing ears to listen to the issues that inevitably arose in the difficult work of instructional leadership—but they also provided ideas, advice, and problem-solving as trusted colleagues who were not in a position of authority over the leader seeking support. As one of four instructional specialists in one school with Springfield, MA, explained to us:

> Well, as you see, we have a "dorm room" here—it's all four of us sticking together, and actually when [one of us] was across the hallway at the beginning of the year, that made no sense…because we spent our time in the hallway trying to find each other…but I can just [call my colleague's name] across the room versus being lazy and have to get up and walk across the hall….We all meet once a week for Leadership Team, which is tomorrow. It's definitely a working team, and the whole cliché of there's no "I"—there really is no "I" in team.…It's easy for us because, there are bumps, but we talk through the bumps, if it doesn't work.

In the most developed instances of this kind of arrangement, members of networked groups of principals were encouraged to see themselves as resources for each others' work, by making known and available to each other their differing expertise as a potential source for future assistance or advice.

4. Support for learning-focused leadership means responsive attention to administrative or management issues facing the school.

Especially for the administrative leaders in a school (principals and assistant principals) but for others as well, the daily urgencies of urban education entail an enormous number of practical and logistical issues that demand time, attention, diplomacy, and often specialized skill to handle. On one end of a continuum, these

matters concerned the management of personnel, supply orders, procurement of vendor services, and maintenance of the school facility, and on the other end, the management of crises, staff conflict, delicate student placement issues, or interactions with irate parents. In many cases, these issues required, or at least could benefit from, external assistance or intervention.

While urban education bureaucracies are notoriously unresponsive to such matters, the districts we studied had worked on attending to such operational needs in a responsive and streamlined manner *as an essential means of maintaining an overall focus on teaching and learning.* An SRT Executive Director in Atlanta described that district's approach as follows:

> [T]he way I think it was intended is to streamline things for the principals and for the schools. Meaning I [as principal] have a question about something, it's kind of a one-stop shop; meaning I bring my question to the SRT and the SRT will navigate [the central office] in the answer. So I'm not going through seven departments in Central Office to figure out the nitty-gritty of something. So I think it's streamlining the supports.

In this spirit, the districts we studied employed one or more of the following approaches:

- *Developing regular, tailored assistance relationships with school principals* designed to respond to the school leaders' operational as well as instructional needs.

- *Instituting arrangements within the central office,* to encourage coordinated, cross-functional follow-through on central office tasks, while discouraging the fragmentation of responsibility that so often slows down and dilutes the potency of central office response to school needs.

- *Establishing internal incentives and feedback systems within the central office* to encourage all units and staff to see themselves as having a direct service relationship with the schools.

More to the point, the systems and leaders we studied did not treat these matters as separate from instructional improvement but rather intrinsically connected to it. Thus, helping school leaders deal with a leaky roof or rewire a school building in a timely way was part of maintaining an instructional program that kept teachers and their students focused on learning. Enabling prompt personnel transactions

was part of getting good instructional staff in front of students who needed them, without loss of instructional days or weeks. Absent this kind of operational and crisis-management support, school administrators' working days were at risk of being consumed by matters that did not necessarily enhance the instructional improvement work of the school.

5. Learning-focused leadership needs to be sponsored and legitimized within the school, district central office, and larger community.

Finally, a different yet essential kind of support resided in the efforts by leaders, often those in positions of supervisory authority, to proactively *sponsor* and *legitimize* learning-focused leadership work. This kind of support was necessary because, for reasons discussed earlier—its newness, ambiguity, lack of precedent, or lack of trust—learning-focused leadership can be organizationally fragile and easily abandoned, especially in the early stages of reorienting leadership toward learning improvement.

By championing the overall enterprise, reminding people what they were doing and why, and by normalizing new and unusual forms of leadership practice, leaders who acted as sponsors for learning-focused leadership communicated that it was a legitimate and expected part of the educational system, for both those occupying traditional and accepted positions and others in relatively new or unfamiliar roles. Sponsorship of learning-focused leadership showed up in three primary ways in our studies:

- *Normalizing teacher leaders' work in schools*. In many of the schools we studied in which teachers and others were assuming various middle-ground positions between the supervisory administrators and classroom teachers, conscious steps were taken by the school administrators to explain and legitimize the efforts of the new teacher leaders to staffs who were sometimes reluctant or resistant.

- *"Stewarding" central office transformation efforts*. Transforming the central office in the sites we studied took relentless stewardship not just by superintendents but by various staff, including chiefs of staff, executive directors, and others throughout the central office. Stewardship involved developing and

explaining the theory of action underlying transformation efforts, both within the districts and to external constituencies, and creating various opportunities for people inside and outside the school system to understand what the district was doing. It also involved strategically brokering external resources to support the ongoing effort to transform the system.

- *Shepherding the equity conversation in district-wide resource planning.* Through a process that could last years, district leaders helped stakeholders identify the equity challenges facing a district or school and publicly built a community mission that prioritizes enhancing the equity of the educational system. Then, as specific actions were taken to enhance equity, the leaders engaged stakeholders in continuing conversation leading up to, and following, specific decisions to invest resources disproportionately, thereby trying to craft coherence and foster deeper commitment among the various parties.
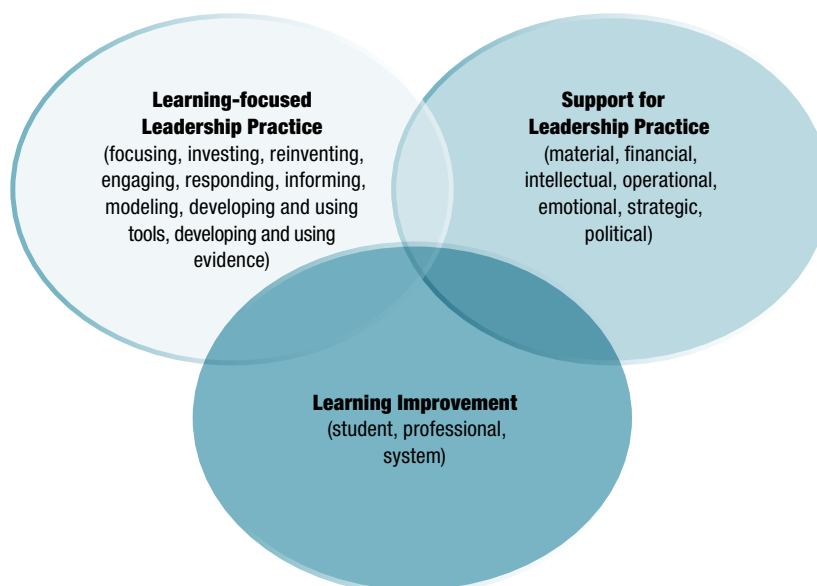
These kinds of actions by educational leaders provide a kind of overall political support for learning-focused leaders' efforts. At the same time, these actions clarify the direction of improvement work and the compelling reasons for it. In this sense, educational systems recognize that leadership is likely to face resistance and engender conflict and that leaders who pursue a learning improvement agenda need protection.

The Web of Support for Learning Improvement and Learning-focused Leadership Practice

All the different forms of leadership support just discussed were in evidence in some degree in the districts and schools we studied. And to the extent that they were both present and aligned with each other, they formed a mutually reinforcing web of support for the practice of learning-focused leadership and, ultimately, for learning improvement, as signaled schematically by Figure 5 below. One form of support reinforced another, and the same structures and practices could be invoked in offering more than one kind of support. Network arrangements in several districts, for example, simultaneously offered school principals and other school staff colleagues intellectual, emotional, operational, and strategic support. Within the schools, principals guided and supported teacher leaders' learning and practice by offering material and financial resources, providing ideas (or access to idea sources), and legitimizing the work of teacher leaders in the eyes of staff members who were not always initially receptive.

This and other forms of leadership support were simultaneously occasions for focusing effort on learning, modeling good practice, engaging educators in improvement work, and developing and using evidence, among other forms of learning-focused leadership practice. In this sense, support activities not only guide and assist the practice of learning-focused leadership, they also *embody* it. Leadership directed at teachers, teaching, and student learning needs support. Leadership support is itself leadership. The two are flip sides of the same coin.

Figure 5. Web of Support for Learning Improvement and Learning-focused Leadership Work

Learning-focused Leadership Practice
(focusing, investing, reinventing, engaging, responding, informing, modeling, developing and using tools, developing and using evidence)

Support for Leadership Practice
(material, financial, intellectual, operational, emotional, strategic, political)

Learning Improvement
(student, professional, system)

Concluding Observations
New Work and Continuing Challenges

Taken together, learning-focused leadership practice and leadership support, exercised by leaders at multiple levels of the system, constitute a major potential influence on learning improvement. In the districts we studied, this leadership work accomplished its purpose by engaging the attention and talents of a variety of staff in efforts to improve teaching and learning, while creating a web of support for instructional leaders' work. In ways that were both overt and subtle, these actions offered a mutually reinforcing set of influences on educators' daily practice and, ultimately, on student learning. Our data suggest two kinds of overall conclusions:

1. *The capacity of the educational system to enhance the practices that produce student learning depends on leadership that focuses on learning improvement for both students and professional staff and that mobilizes effort to that end.*

2. *The power and sustainability of learning-focused leadership depends, in large measure, on the presence of a multi-level system of leadership support.*

These broad conclusions come from looking carefully at schools that were making progress (by some local measures), at districts that were intentionally trying to transform their practice to support district-wide teaching and learning improvement, and at several other districts that had placed a priority on instructional improvement. Because our conclusions do not come from tracing the consequences of leadership actions all the way to student learning outcomes over time, and because we studied schools and districts that might be considered exceptional, at least not typical, two questions arise: Why should we believe that learning-focused leadership and leadership support matter for student learning? What continuing challenges will schools and districts face in attempting to act on these ideas?

Do Learning-focused Leadership and Leadership Support Matter for the Improvement of Student Learning?

Although these studies did not directly assess the relationship between either leadership practices or leadership support activities and the improvement of student learning, there are good reasons to believe that both learning-focused leadership and leadership support are contributing to this ultimate aim.

First of all, the schools and districts we studied are sites with histories of chronic low performance, and yet over recent years, continuing through our data collection window, measures of student performance were improving. While there is no way of demonstrating an unambiguous causal link between these trends and leadership or leadership support practices, there is nonetheless a strong likelihood that what leaders were doing and how they were supported were an important part of the story.

Take, for example, the way school principals approached their responsibilities and how they were supported. Research other than our own has increasingly demonstrated strong links between student learning measures and leadership activities at the school level, among them activities that (1) *set direction*, by articulating a vision for the school, fostering the acceptance of group goals, and creating high performance expectations; (2) *develop people*, by offering intellectual stimulation, providing individualized support, and setting examples for others to follow; and (3) *redesign the organization*, by strengthening school cultures, modifying organizational structures, and building collaborative processes.[12] These are all activities that the school leaders we studied were engaged in extensively, as they fashioned and pursued their respective learning improvement agendas.

What is more, evidence from the Study of Leadership for Learning Improvement clearly demonstrates that school leaders were *helped* to set (and maintain) direction, develop people, and redesign their organizations through their interaction with their respective systems of leadership support. The school leaders' visions were intimately linked to a larger vision of learning improvement projected by the district and state in which they worked. Interactions with others (e.g., central office staff or their peers in other schools) helped to establish and spread the high expectations. Through interactions with both central office staff and individuals in external reform support organizations, school principals themselves received intellectual stimulation and individualized support, including modeling of promising practices. They were both prompted and enabled to redesign their organizations by investment frameworks—overarching decisions about the discretion that was expected or allowed at different levels of the system and how initiative could be exercised—that offered flexibility and some discretionary resources, especially for increasing their instructional leadership capacity.

Our research also suggests more specific effects on instructional practice that are likely to be having a positive effect on student learning. As they engaged and responded to the expectations of the larger environments, principals and other

supervisory leaders in these schools, as well as teacher leaders, were focusing teachers' efforts on particular aspects of the curriculum (especially where student performance was weak), developing a vocabulary for approaching gaps and gains in students' progress, and helping teachers differentiate their approach to students within their classrooms. There is good reason to believe that focused, differentiated instruction, which is responsive to particular needs and differences among students, is helping these schools and districts improve their learning measures over time.[13]

Continuing Challenges in the Crucible of Urban Education

Learning-focused leadership is hard work and, correspondingly, so is the work of supporting this leadership. Both are made harder by dynamics and conditions that typify urban educational settings. Our analyses underscore several aspects of the effort to exercise and support leadership for learning improvement that will continue to challenge educational leaders, especially given the conditions that prevail in many urban settings.

The challenges of assuming and maintaining a learning focus. What our investigation found about learning-focused leadership practice and leadership support underscores several things about this facet of the educational reform puzzle that will continue to challenge those who seek to lead for learning improvement. First, participants throughout the schools and districts that wish to go this route have a steep learning curve to ascend. Second, they need to be prepared for fundamental changes in practice and the organization of their work. And third, they will need to actively search for and prepare the right people to do this leadership work.

The first continuing challenge goes without saying: *There is a lot of new professional learning to do—for teacher leaders negotiating the middle ground in schools, principals figuring out how to lead instructional leadership teams successfully, central office staff engaging in support work with school principals, or others in the system.* This new professional learning would be a challenge in any school or district setting, but it is compounded in large urban districts, given the sheer number of actors and the high proportion of struggling schools. And for all of these educators, learning to do the work described in this report is a long-term prospect under the best of circumstances.

Among other things, the *new professional learning is about fundamental changes in leadership practice, and systems must assess their readiness for it.* The degree

of change was most apparent for many of the teacher leaders we studied and also for the central office staff who worked directly with principals, most of whose positions didn't exist five years ago. Are schools and district central offices ready to take this work on? The answer can reflect various issues, among them, whether the main decision makers have been engaged in a significant period of design work or development of an appropriate theory of action, and whether the new arrangements and approaches have been tried out on a pilot basis to de-bug them and fine-tune the plan for contingencies particular to each local context. Not the least of the factors in the readiness equation is the willingness of key constituencies to sign on. For example, in one of the districts we studied, detailed negotiations across four years with the teachers union were necessary before a new kind of school-based instructional leadership position could be created. Urban school districts typically face tight labor markets and complicated political force fields, which may signal a lack of readiness for the fundamental change work that substantial learning improvement requires.

Among the variables in the readiness equation is the identification and availability of people to exercise leadership in the ways this report describes. *Finding and preparing leaders for learning-focused leadership work remains a central challenge, especially in urban systems, in which leadership roles are not always easily filled with well-qualified candidates.* What will prepare new leaders for learning-focused work and help them continue to learn productively, once they are engaged in leadership practice? The sites we studied were often engaged in growing their own leaders in a variety of ways, most visibly in district-based certification programs that set up alternative pathways to the principalship. But these programs are just one step toward a much larger goal, which remains daunting in urban settings, in which the incentives and rewards for assuming leadership or leadership support work are not always substantial. The continuing challenge is to both create and inform these pathways to leadership in ways that motivate participation and guide promising candidates toward new conceptions of their practice.

The challenges posed by critical conditions in urban systems. However educators seek to prepare themselves for learning-focused work and engage in it over time, they do so in the face of pressures that at best will act as distractions but at worst will present major constraints or obstacles to learning-focused leadership. Our findings point to four such conditions that will have important implications in educational systems that are serious about learning improvement. First, educational

leaders are currently working through a major economic downturn, with no immediate end in sight. Second, the shortage of resources will limit leaders' capacity to address inequities, if not exacerbate the inequities themselves. Third, operational demands of urban schooling will persist and constantly threaten to divert attention from instructional improvement goals. And fourth, the chronic instability of top leadership in urban systems will make it harder to maintain a persistent public focus on learning, as well as overall sponsorship of reforms.

In the current economic climate, *districts and schools face bleak prospects for maintaining many aspects of the educational program that are valued, not the least of which are the investments in instructional leadership detailed earlier in the report*. That said, the schools and districts we studied had seen recent periods of retrenchment and/or declining enrollment, and notably, much of the investment in instructional leadership was achieved through the *reallocation* of existing funds rather than through additional resources. To be sure, anyone perceived as not doing the core work of the school or district is an easy target in times of budget cutting, and therefore the investments made in the leadership support system will continue to be challenged, and districts must articulate the importance of this central role in the improvement of learning.

Because contests over resource allocation are likely to intensify when times are tight, the differential allocation of staffing and other resources that are so central to addressing equity goals in learning improvement may be at risk. As our findings and others have demonstrated, ambitious learning improvement efforts anchored to equity principles that imply differential investment of resources will generate the predictable pushback from formerly advantaged interests. The sheer diversity of interests, and the stark gaps between advantaged and less advantaged segments of the community, no less competing interest groups within the district workforce, set the stage for major tensions regarding differential resource investments. *To manage the dynamics of differential investment, district and school leaders must exercise as much foresight as possible in laying the groundwork for equity-focused conversations and shepherding these conversations over time.*

The operational demands of running urban schools and school systems—including facility, accounting, personnel, procurement, compliance reporting, and other basic management tasks—are often complex and all-consuming, and they always threaten to distract leaders' attention from instructional improvement. These demands may increase in times of acute resource shortage. *This situation presents*

learning-focused leaders with the challenge of minimizing operational distractions related to the basic management of schools, and indeed a large system of schools, while helping to find ways in which operational and instructional matters can inform each other. Leadership support systems face a related challenge, as principals or others seek help with matters that have relatively little to do with instructional improvement or for which they are initially unable to see the instructional ramifications.

Leadership support systems, as well as the exercise of leadership for learning improvement in all its aspects, depend on continuity of leadership over time. In the sites we studied, this was especially obvious in the stewardship role that superintendents and executive-level staff performed in sustaining a transformation strategy or shepherding the development of an equity-focused learning improvement agenda. School principals who had long tenure in their buildings displayed a comparable capacity. Leaders such as these who are around for long periods of time are better able to make long-term investments and hold to them, not to mention develop and deepen work relationships. The nature of leadership support, as we have described it, depends utterly on sufficient consistency in leadership—that is, among leaders within the system who are committed to making learning improvement a centerpiece of their own and the system's work—to allow people to learn over time. A sufficiently distributed leadership support system can weather the disappearance of one or another key player, and we found viable efforts at leadership support continuing, despite sudden changes or disruptions.

Nonetheless, the well-established pattern of instability in top leadership positions within urban educational systems will pose a continuing challenge to the sustainability of learning-focused leadership and the leadership support system. The challenge is to develop deep, distributed leadership roots that can help the system manage top leadership turnover at the same time that the system seeks greater continuity in top leadership—a state of affairs that is more and more likely, the more the system succeeds at learning improvement.

Fulfilling the Promise of Learning-focused Leadership

Even in the face of these challenges, learning-focused leadership is still a realizable goal for many, if not most, urban educational systems, though the pace and scope of the changes that are necessary for this to happen will vary considerably across settings. What will it take to get there? The following five requirements are worth considering.

■ *Bedrock convictions. Learning-focused leadership work is anchored to the notion that learning improvement is possible at scale, that professionals and students are capable of much more than they have typically accomplished to date, and that leadership work will translate into demonstrable performance.* From this and other studies, we know enough to have confidence in these convictions, but educational leaders will need to assert them loudly and often to keep convincing a diverse and sometimes contentious array of stakeholders that the changes they support are both possible and desirable.

■ *Explicit focus on improving the quality and practice of leadership.* While teaching and the nature of the student learning experience must remain the center of all improvement efforts, the quality and practice of leadership exercised from various vantage points around the system have an intrinsic and important relationship to teaching and learning, enabling it or constraining it in innumerable ways. *To realize the promise of learning-focused leadership means, if nothing else, to intentionally include leadership practice as part of the learning improvement equation.*

■ *A learning stance.* Improving teaching and leadership practice means new learning for teachers, administrators, and other staff, all of whom have much to understand and new skills to acquire to do their work effectively. But more to the point, *a central part of the work is to adopt a learning stance, one that assumes that one never knows it all, nor has a sufficient understanding of newly arising problems of practice.* The systems we have studied make abundantly clear the power of adopting a public learning stance to carry forward leadership work that seeks to improve learning of students and others.

■ *Talent search and talent development.* Especially where new or redefined positions are concerned, but also for the full range of positions from which leadership is exercised either formally or informally, the educational system needs committed, capable people to take on learning-focused leadership work. In some instances that means finding different people to do the job (as has been well illustrated in central office transformation efforts, but also at the school level). More often it means inviting existing staff to explore and expand their leadership capabilities, as investors, as instructional leaders, and as leadership support staff. *School districts and schools can do much to encourage promising leaders to emerge and to develop their practice in ways that support learning improvement.*

■ *Systemic perspective.* Finally, the whole is—or at least can be—greater than the sum of the parts. *The challenge for reformers, system leaders, and practitioners at all levels is to visualize the interconnected whole of a functioning educational system that coherently brings ideas, energy, resources, and pressure to bear on the problem of educating a diverse student population equitably and effectively.* Within this well-functioning whole, the exercise of learning-focused leadership entails different elements—public focus, investment in learning improvement, new work practice and relationships, and engagement with evidence—that are aligned and connect with one another. And surrounding that work, a system of interrelated and varied supports can greatly enhance the chances that this leadership work will continue and be able to have its intended effect.

Coherent connections among all of these things are more likely to be forged and maintained when the participants take a systemic view of the enterprise. Ultimately, we need educational systems in which the whole and the parts work together to the greater benefit of urban school children. That is a worthy, if difficult, goal. A new generation of educational leaders is emerging who can help realize it.

Methodological Notes

The Study of Leadership for Learning Improvement was set up as a multi-component investigation with three primary study strands addressing related facets of the practice of learning-focused leadership and its support in urban districts. (A separately reported line of investigation took place at the state level in the states within which the districts resided.[14])

- *Resource Investment study strand.* This investigation concentrated on the ways districts and school leaders (re)allocate staffing and other resources in relation to learning improvement goals and a commitment to improving equity within the school district.

- *School Leadership study strand.* This investigation focused on the exercise of leadership in schools by the various individuals and groups who composed the school's instructional leadership "cadre," in response to environmental demands and conditions in district, community, and state.

- *Central Office Transformation study strand.* This investigation captured the dynamics and contours of effort by study districts to fundamentally reform the work practices, organization, and working culture within the central office, while altering the working relationships between school and central office, so that the district focused more singularly and effectively on the improvement of teaching and learning.

Each operated, in effect, as a separate study, with a distinct research team and design, each undertook a separate line of analysis with somewhat different purposes, and the results of each have been reported separately. That said, the designs were intentionally coordinated in several ways, and they shared some study sites and data collection. What is more, all three shared some overarching design similarities: They were largely qualitative, multiple-case designs, featuring repeated visits across a year and a half; they triangulated findings and conclusions among interview, observational, and archival data sources; and they focused on leadership phenomena at the district and school levels, though their degree of emphasis on these levels differed.

Overlapping Study Samples

The overarching study design sought to link the three lines of investigation, in part, through overlapping samples. All three study strands used two sites in common, while adding one or two others that provided useful contrasts for the particular purposes of the study strand, as shown in Figure M-1 below.

Figure M-1. Study Samples for the Three Study Strands
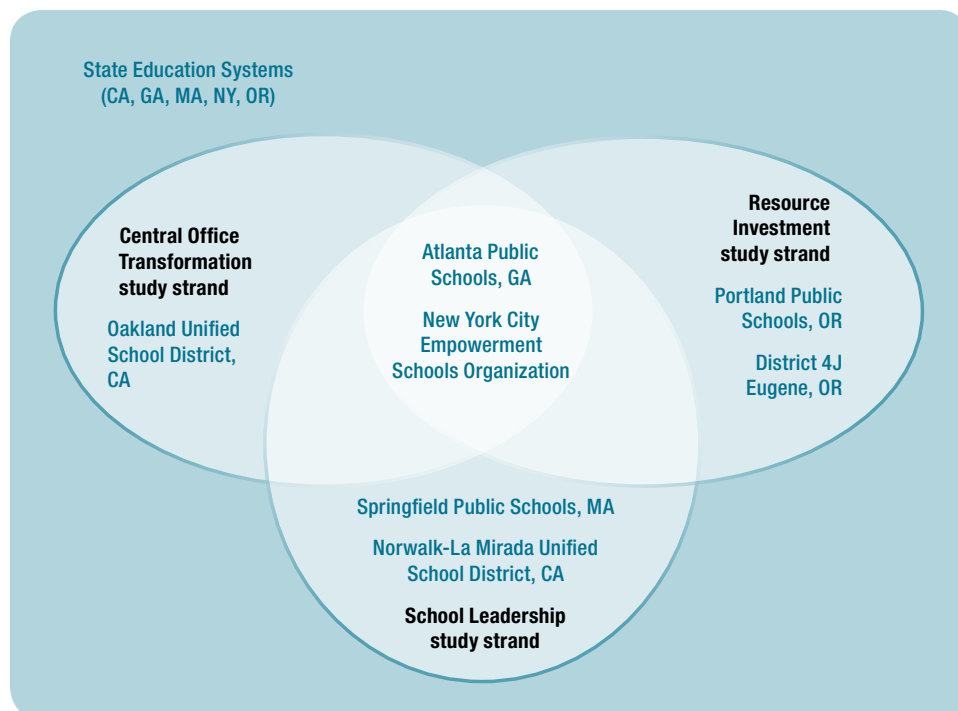
Although the specific selection criteria differed somewhat by study strand, all three samples emphasized urban districts that were proactively pursuing a learning improvement agenda, with special emphasis on leadership development and the improvement of leadership practice. What is more, all seven sites displayed evidence, at the time of site selection, of improvement on measures of student learning, though the actual measures and timeframes for evidence differed by site and so they cannot be compared in any strictly comparable way. That said, comparable measures were available for the two common sites—Atlanta Public Schools and NYC/Department of Education—through the National Assessment of Educa-

tional Progress (NAEP) Trial Urban District Assessment, and this source revealed clear evidence of progress from 2003 to 2007 in 4th and 8th grade mathematics and reading.[15] By design, four of the seven sites had had an ongoing relationship with The Wallace Foundation prior to our research, and they had received grant support for pursuing leadership-related improvement work; all but one of the five states in which these districts sat also had received leadership-related grants from The Foundation.

Within these districts, three to five schools were selected for intensive study, chiefly for the school-level analyses that were a focus of the Resource Investment and School Leadership study strands (for a total of 21 schools across the two studies). Across all sites, other schools were visited, though less frequently, to add depth to the data collection for purposes of that study strand, as in the Central Office Transformation investigation, in which central office administrators were sometimes followed to school sites, to develop observational evidence of their school-based work. The 21 intensively studied schools were selected to demonstrate (1) progress on improving student learning for the full range of a diverse student population; (2) reconfigured leadership arrangements within the school designed to share the leadership work and maximize leaders' attention to teaching and learning; and (3) experimentation with the allocation of staffing resources, to maximize attention to the equitable improvement of student learning. The resulting set of schools were at all levels—elementary (11) and middle and high (10)—and varied in other important respects: longevity of the principal, school size (from several hundred students to well over two thousand), neighborhood versus district-wide attendance area, and school of choice versus district-assigned student population.

Chief Differences in Design and Research Approach

Despite their considerable similarities, the three study strands differed in several important respects:

■ *Resource Investment study strand*. Unlike the other two, this investigation connected qualitative investigations with quantitative analyses of resource investment patterns, while de-emphasizing the observation of leadership practice and events. Overall, the study strand paid most attention to staffing resources and the decisions made at all levels to allocate or reallocate these resources. District- and school-level resource profiles were prepared as a pre-

liminary step toward the cross-case analyses that underlie the study strand's main conclusions. The bulk of the analytic work involved a systematic cross-case comparison of schools and districts, in relation to an inductively derived analytic template.

■ *School Leadership study strand.* This investigation concentrated effort on school-level events, including a limited amount of classroom observation, observation of the interaction between school-level leaders and others, and interviews with a range of educators cutting across the school staff (principal and assistant principals, teacher leaders, coaches, staff developers; data specialists and assessment coordinators; classroom teachers; and other support staff). Detailed individual analytic profiles were developed of each school as a first step toward a cross school-analysis that formed the basis of the study's findings and conclusions, which were generated through an approximation of a grounded theory process.

■ *Central Office Transformation study strand.* This investigation concentrated effort on interviewing a wide range of central office staff, especially those who worked most directly and continuously with school principals, who were interviewed four times across the study. These data sources were supplemented by various archival records and an extensive observational record of meetings and other leadership activities in which central office staff participated. The analysis rested heavily on a theory-based conceptual framework and elaborate coding scheme linked to this framework.

Readers wishing a more complete discussion of the design, sample, data collection approach, or analytic work in each of the three study strands are referred to the respective methodological Appendices in the three main study reports:

■ Methodological appendix in: Plecki, M., Knapp, M. S., Castañeda, T., Halverson, T., LaSota, R., & Lochmiller, C. (2009). *How leaders invest staffing resources for learning improvement* (pp. 101–109). Seattle WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington.

■ Methodological appendix in: Portin, B. S., Knapp, M. S., Dareff, S., Feldman, S., Russell, F. A., Samuelson, C., & Yeh, T. L. (2009). *Leadership for learning improvement in urban schools* (pp. 110–120). Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington.

■ Methodological appendix in: Honig, M. I., Copland, M. A., Rainey, L., Lorton, J. A., & Newton, M. (2010). *Central office transformation for district-wide teaching and learning improvement* (pp. 128–134). Seattle WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington.

Endnotes

[1] From Payne, C. M. (2008). *So much reform: So little change: The persistence of failure in urban schools.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press. The quoted passage as a whole is found on pages 33–34. The principal's reflections cited in this passage come from: Marshall, K. (2003). A principal looks back: Standards matter. *Phi Delta Kappan 85,* 104–113, and are found on pages 107 and 109.

[2] Portin, B. S., Knapp, M. S., Dareff, S., Feldman, S., Russell, F. A., Samuelson, C., & Yeh, T. L. (2009). *Leadership for learning improvement in urban schools.* Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington. Details of this case on this page and the next come from a school case portrait developed for this research.

[3] These ideas build on others' work using similar terms, for example, writing that has directed attention to "learning-centered leadership"—Murphy, J., Elliott, S. N., Goldring, E., & Porter, A. C. (2006). *Learning-centered leadership: A conceptual foundation.* New York: The Wallace Foundation—and "leadership for learning"—Resnick, L., & Glennan, T. (2002). Leadership for learning: A theory of action for urban school districts, in A. Hightower, M. S. Knapp, J. Marsh, & M. W. McLaughlin (Eds.), *School districts and instructional renewal* (pp. 160–172). New York: Teachers College Press; Stoll, L., Fink, D., & Earl, L. (2003). *It's about learning [and it's about time]: What's in it for schools?* London & New York: Routledge Falmer; and Swaffield, S., & MacBeath , J. (2009). Leadership for learning, in Macbeath, J., & Dempster, N. (Eds.), *Connecting leadership and learning: Principles for practice* (pp. 32–52). London and New York: Routledge). We note also that others use similar terms, though not necessarily in all the ways that we do—for example, C. Glickman's *Leadership for learning* (Alexandria VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2002) focuses primarily on the direct guidance that school principals (or others) offer their teaching staff; P. Schlechty's *Leading for learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009) concentrates instead on how schools can be transformed into learning organizations; and *Learner-centered leadership* (an edited volume by A. B. Danzig, K.M. Borman, B. A. Jones, and W. F. Wright, Mahway NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2009) emphasizes leadership training approaches that foster learning communities. Although these latter works do share some resemblances with our own, they were not central to the development of our thinking.

[4] For a fuller discussion of these ideas, see Knapp, M. S., Copland, M. A., & Talbert, J. E. (2003). *Leading for learning: Reflective tools for school and district leaders.* Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington; Copland, M. A., & Knapp, M. S. (2006). *Connecting leadership with learning: A framework for reflection, planning, and action.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.

[5] See Plecki, M., Knapp, M. S., Castañeda, T., Halverson, T., LaSota, R., & Lochmiller, C. (2009). *How leaders invest staffing resources for learning improvement.* Seattle WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington.

[6] See Portin, B. S., Knapp, M. S., Dareff, S., Feldman, S., Russell, F. A., Samuelson, C., & Yeh, T. L. (2009). *Leadership for learning improvement in urban schools.* Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington.

[7] See Honig, M. I., Copland, M. A., Rainey, L., Lorton, J. A., & Newton, M. (2010). *Central office transformation for district-wide teaching and learning improvement.* Seattle WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington.

[8] At the time of our study, all schools within the New York City Department of Education chose to be part of 1 of 14 "School Support Organizations" (SSOs), the segment of the district central office that offered the most direct support to the school. Our research concentrated on the largest of these SSOs, then called the "Empowerment Schools Organization" (ESO), which subsumed approximately 500 of the City's 1,500 schools. Our data came primarily from ESO schools and central office units, although some data from sources outside this SSO provided background to our analyses. Thus we were not studying the whole of the Department of Education reform; NYC/ESO comprised the relevant "district" for most of our analyses.

9 This investment pattern may have slowed somewhat under the current tight budget constraints that many districts operate under these days. Nonetheless, the commitment to investing in instructional leadership can still be maintained, albeit at reduced levels, under fiscally adverse conditions.

10 For a more detailed discussion of the Instructional Leadership Directors' work, see Honig, M. I., Copland, M. A., Rainey, L., Lorton, J. A., & Newton, M. (2010). *Central office transformation for districtwide teaching and learning improvement* (pp. 25–55). Seattle WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington.

11 The research base for the notion of "high-quality assistance relationship" is fully described in: Honig, M. I. (2008). District central offices as learning organizations: How sociocultural and organizational learning theories elaborate district central office administrators' participation in teaching and learning improvement efforts. *American Journal of Education, 114,* 627–664.

12 See Leithwood, K. A., & Riehl, C. (2005). What do we already know about educational leadership? In Firestone, W. A., & Riehl, C. (Eds.), *A new agenda for research in educational leadership* (pp. 12–27). New York city: Teachers College Press.

13 While there is not yet an extensive research base on the topic, converging lines of theory and empirical work suggest the potential power of appropriately differentiating instruction. For a summary of this work see: Tomlinson, C. A., & McTighe, J. (2006). *Integrating differentiated instruction and understanding by design: Connecting content and kids* (pp. 179–184). Alexandria VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

14 Results of the state-level analysis are reported in an occasional paper: Hood, B., Knapp, M. S., & Plecki, M. L. (2010). *Blending accountability and support: Reorienting state leadership for learning improvement*—an occasional paper. Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington.

15 See *The Nation's Report Card.* http://nationsreportcard.gov/tuda.asp, accessed July 25, 2010.

Acknowledgments

ctp

Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

CTP—a national research consortium home-based at the University of Washington and including three other research partners (Stanford, University of Pennsylvania, and University of Michigan)—studies the way policies, leadership, and conditions in schools, districts, states, the federal government, and the education profession shape the quality of teaching and learning in the nation's schools. The Center pays particular attention to the ways these forces and conditions interact with each other to influence what teachers, learners, and educational leaders do in daily practice.

A major goal of the Center's program of research is to discover and document the means for improving practice so that the nation's young people experience a challenging and equitable education. To that end, the Center's research products are designed to inform policymakers, practicing leaders, and the educational reform community, along with scholars.

The Wallace Foundation®

Supporting ideas.
Sharing solutions.
Expanding opportunities.®

The Wallace Foundation seeks to support and share effective ideas and practices that expand learning and enrichment opportunities for all people.
Its three current objectives are:

• Strengthen education leadership to improve student achievement
• Enhance out-of-school learning opportunities
• Expand participation in arts and culture

For more information and research on these and other related topics, please visit our Knowledge Center at www.wallacefoundation.org.

ctp

Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON