



**Mid-Level  
District Staff and  
Instructional Improvement**

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***Leading From the Middle: Mid-Level Central Office Staff and Instructional Improvement***

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# **Leading From the Middle:**

## Mid-Level District Staff and Instructional Improvement

By Dr. Patricia Burch and Dr. James Spillane



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*Leading from the Middle: Mid-Level Central Office Staff and Instructional Improvement* is the first report derived from a larger, three-year qualitative study on central-office/school interactions. Our thanks to the program officers board members, and officers of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Joyce Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, the Helen Bader Foundation, and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for making this research possible.

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## Foreword

**T**he Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, a national network of school reformers, currently operates in nine cities—Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, Oakland, Philadelphia, and Seattle. We advocate for sweeping policy changes and practices to transform school districts by moving additional authority, resources, and accountability to the school level. We seek to reconnect schools with their communities and completely redesign the role of central offices in urban school districts.

The Cross City Campaign believes that fundamental improvement in public education requires bold action by people in different sectors working together, forming a national network that is rooted locally and is culturally diverse. We are advocates, teachers, principals, central office administrators, policy analysts, researchers, union officials, community organizers, parents, students, and funders. We provide leadership-development training and technical assistance, produce research-driven publications and practical tools, connect reformers through cross-site visits and national meetings, and build local and national constituencies to advance reform efforts.

Cross City Campaign members believe dialogue and debate are critical for real reform to occur. If we are to break through the status-quo and make significant improvements in all schools, we must be open to discourse and debate. From mutual respect will come the power to ensure that all young people get the very best that education has to offer. The Cross City Campaign provides a forum for this critical exchange to occur.

Since our inception in 1993, the Cross City Campaign has been a leader in promoting and writing about urban district redesign. The fundamental question driving this work has been, “What is the role of the central office in improving instruction?” Our first publication, *Reinventing Central Office: A Primer for Successful Schools*, made a strong case for rethinking district functions and recommended a dramatic revision of urban public school systems, one that shifted most of the funds and authority to the schools and dismantled centralized, bureaucratic structures. A number of years later, as our vision of the district’s role in supporting schools evolved, we published *Changing Rules and Roles: A Primer on School-Based Decision Making*. In this publication, Angus McBeath, the superintendent of the Edmonton Public Schools (Alberta, Canada), described how his district created a radically different role for the central office. We learned from Edmonton how an urban district, with a strong center and an unwavering focus on student achievement, could em-

power principals and teachers and redesign the central office to support their work.

In *Leading From the Middle*, the Cross City Campaign continues to explore the district’s role in instructional reform. In the fall of 2000, we initiated a three-year qualitative study in three urban school districts that examined the role and importance of district/school interactions in the implementation of local instructional improvement. The three districts—Chicago, Milwaukee, and Seattle—already had promising systemic reform initiatives underway as well as experience in decentralizing authority and resources to schools (see Appendix A for city demographics). The multi-year research project was led by Dr. Patricia Burch (primary investigator), who oversaw researchers working in the three districts, and by Dr. James Spillane (project consultant). The project was directed by the Cross City Campaign. This report draws from a subset of that data and looks at the role of middle-level central office staff and their relationships with staff in local schools. *Leading From the Middle* provides an important perspective on the role of the school district in improving instruction and will form the basis of a national dialogue throughout our network.

*The Cross City Campaign does not assert that the perceptions or experiences surfaced in this report are statistically representative of the districts as a whole. However, the perceptions and experiences reflected here represent those that were prevalent among the interview subjects.*

## Executive Summary

No silver bullets for improving achievement for all students exist. However, anyone whose paycheck comes from a school district is ultimately responsible for these students. *Leading From the Middle: Mid-Level District Staff and Instructional Improvement*, the first in a series of reports drawn from a larger, qualitative study of district/school interactions, is significant new research that looks at the critical leadership role that mid-level central office staff play in implementing district reforms. While volumes have been written about the important leadership roles of superintendents and their instructional initiatives, our research examines leadership at the intersection between schools and districts. From this vantage point, mid-level central office staff emerge as pivotal actors in the two-way translation and communication between top district leadership and school-level staff around instructional

initiatives. Our research suggests that mid-level managers have significant impact on how district reform policies are understood and acted on by school leaders. Mid-level staff are program managers, content area directors, budget specialists, and others who administer or manage programs or services but are not in top cabinet positions, such as deputy superintendents or chief education officers.

After superintendents and school boards establish new policies, mid-level staff have the job of translating big ideas like “improving literacy district-wide “ or “closing the achievement gap” into strategies, guidelines, and procedures that are handed down to schools. We argue that mid-level administrators who bring school people to the table to pool their expertise and then translate this collective expertise into strategies, guidelines, tools, and procedures are more likely to be successful in making district instructional reforms relevant to classroom practice.

Building on scholarship from within and outside of education, we propose a re-conception of the work of mid-level district staff from a communities of practice perspective. From this perspective, mid-level central office staff occupy a strategic position in between the innovations unfolding inside the schools, within and across different central office departments, and beyond. We call this work brokering and identify an array of activities through which mid-level staff broker resources, knowledge, and ideas within and across the district.



## Mid-Level Central Office Staff as Brokers

Borrowing from the work of socio-cultural theorist Etienne Wenger, we apply the term brokering to the work of mid-level central office staff. Brokering represents a distinctly different way of thinking about the work of districts in instructional reform. As brokers, district offices are primarily responsible for cultivating the exchange of information and expertise within and across schools, between schools and third parties, and between instructional leaders working at the very top of the system and those running reforms from inside the school. In this way, central office staff members help determine how principals, teachers, and other school administrators perceive and act on district instructional reform policies.

In the accounts from 55 mid-level managers from three urban, public school districts, we describe their brokering roles as:

- **Tools Designers** who translate reform agendas into tangible materials for schools to use.
- **Data Managers** who work with implementation and student outcome data to help teachers and principals use it to improve instruction.
- **Trainers and Support Providers** who design staff development and training to support instructional leadership at different levels.
- **Network Builders** who create routines and practices that build or sustain connections between people who have expertise to share but little contact.

These roles are not intended to reflect central office staff job titles but are drawn from central office staffs' own descriptions of their work. An individual central office administrator, regardless of her formal job title, may assume some or all of these functions in her day-to-day work.

### Contrasting Approaches to Brokering

Our research shows that while most district staff view brokering as important, they construct their roles in distinctly different ways. Based on mid-level managers' own accounts of their work, we have identified two distinct orientations they have about where expertise for reform resides. These orientations affect the attitude that they bring to their work and to their interactions with principals, teachers, and other schools staff.

After superintendents and school boards establish new policies, mid-level staff have the job of translating big ideas like "improving literacy district-wide" or "closing the achievement gap" into strategies, guidelines, and procedures that are handed down to schools.

1. **Authoritative Orientation:** Mid-level managers with this orientation see themselves and others as experts and see principals, teachers, and other school staff primarily as targets and beneficiaries of their own and others' expertise. **From this perspective, a primary goal of brokering is to cultivate exchanges that channel expertise to schools.**

2. **Collaborative Orientation:** Mid-level managers with this orientation see principals and teachers not simply as targets of policy change but as substantive sources of expertise as well. **From this perspective, a primary goal of brokering is to foster exchanges that help central office staff learn from and become more informed by schools' expertise and reform experiences.**

In our analysis, we found that the majority of mid-level central office staff brought an authoritative orientation to their interactions with schools. We argue that the predominance of an authoritative orientation in district/school interactions is problematic and undercuts district efforts to improve instruction district-wide. While far fewer mid-level managers have a collaborative orientation to brokering, we believe that their approach to working with schools is essential in creating communities of practice around instructional reform.



## Communities of Practice within District Reform

Because of our focus on district/school interactions, we use a framework drawn from the literature on communities of practice by Wenger. His pioneering work looks at interactions and relationships between people, the connections people make across work places and from different organizations, and the collective knowledge they build. Drawing on Wenger's definition, a community of practice refers to the informal relationships that school leaders, district staff, and third parties (such as foundations, universities, and school reform organizations) cultivate in order to improve the quality of teaching across all schools within a city. A central activity of a community of practice is to gather expertise and create processes and practices (we call tools) in order to support and sustain collective work around a given agenda.

Most of the mid-level staff we interviewed reported that they cultivated and valued relationships at multiple levels inside and outside the district and identified them as important to their work. We distinguish three communities that mid-level central office staff identified as important to their work: 1) relationships with other district office staff; 2) relationships with school staff members; and 3) relationships with reformers and/or scholars working nationally or locally on instructional change.

A central activity of a community of practice is to gather expertise and create processes and practices (we call tools) in order to support and sustain collective work around a given agenda.

## Four Barriers that Prevent Change in Central Office Support to Schools

We argue that from a communities of practice perspective, the quality of district instructional support to schools can only improve when both mid-level staff and school leaders find value in their interactions. This study describes four common barriers, as seen from school level, that prevent central staff and school leaders from interacting in productive ways—ways that leverage the knowledge and skills from within schools and from outside the district to help improve student learning:

We argue that from a communities of practice perspective, the quality of district instructional support to schools can only improve when both mid-level staff and school leaders find value in their interactions.

### 1. *School Relationships Seen as Low*

**Priorities:** Mid-level staff spend little time in direct communication with school staff and feel burdened with district meetings and paperwork that take precedence over their work with schools.

### 2. *Communications Based on*

**Directives, Not Dialogue:** When mid-level district staff do have contact with schools, they spend too much time communicating policy expectations and too little time in substantive conversation about teaching and learning with school leaders.

### 3. *Administrators Lack Understanding of School Issues:*

School principals and teachers want central office staff to visit schools and experience first-hand the challenges they encounter every day. Instead, schools are recipients of directives, memos, and emails from people who most likely have never been in their schools or classrooms.

### 4. *Central Office Staff Lack Expertise Around Teaching and Learning:*

Across districts, school leaders viewed the knowledge of district staff about teaching and learning (process and content) as a weak link in district support.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on school accounts, district staff still have much work to do to demonstrate the commitment and knowledge it takes to partner with schools in improving teaching and learning. School staff were more likely to identify the district staff as partners in work and to regularly seek their help when they encountered district staff who:

- engaged school staff in two-way dialogues;
- sought out opportunities to listen to principals and teachers;
- valued and learned from school staff's expertise and experience with reforms;
- demonstrated knowledge of teaching and learning.

We believe that the opportunity for an entire system of schools to succeed at improving teaching and learning can be strongly affected by mid-level staff creating communities of practice in which school personnel (principals, teachers, and other school staff) are partners with the district in determining how instructional policies are designed, translated, and implemented. To do this, districts need to fundamentally redesign how central office staff interact with schools.

**District leaders should:**

**1. Make school issues and needs drive the district's policy agenda.** In order to do this, districts should draw on the enormous expertise of principals and teachers in the design of new reform policies and implementation strategies and create new communication and support structures.

**2. Redefine the role of mid-level central office staff** so that their primary responsibilities are to support and facilitate instructional leadership rather than to issue directives and monitor compliance.

**3. Reorganize the work of mid-level staff** so they can spend more time in schools in order to appreciate the complexities of implementing initiatives and to enable them to translate their understanding into tool creation. Visits to schools by mid-level central office staff need to take precedence over district meetings "downtown."

**4. Invest in on-going professional development for mid-level managers** so that staff learn to more effectively support schools, to deepen their knowledge about teaching and learning, and to integrate their work with other central office departments.

**5. Evaluate mid-level staff member's performance** based on their ability to facilitate instructional improvements in schools.

**6. Minimize interruptions that distract school and central office staff from focusing on instruction** by reducing paper work, minimizing countless phone calls, emails, and faxes sent to principals, and by eliminating excessive district meetings that require principals' attendance.

## Introduction



As districts become more explicit about their intent to impact teaching and learning in the classroom, new frameworks and lenses are needed for examining district roles and for looking at the role of individuals who work for school districts administering or managing programs or services.

**D**espite surging interest in systemic instructional reform, limited research exists on the relationship between central office staff and schools in efforts to improve the quality of teaching in urban districts. While volumes have been written about the formal policy decisions of superintendents and school boards, and the important leadership roles of principals and superintendents in instructional change, very little has been written about the work of middle-level central office staff. Yet, after superintendents and school boards establish new policies, it is mid-level staff who have the difficult job of translating big ideas like “improving literacy district-wide” or “closing the achievement gap” into strategies, guidelines, tools, and procedures that schools can use.<sup>1</sup>

Numerous studies emphasize the central office’s bureaucratic function of compliance monitoring that is dominated by command and control strategies. However, they ignore the range of activities that central office staff employ to support district instructional improvement initiatives. Beyond monitoring change and enforcing compliance in schools, mid-level district staff—science directors, program managers, curriculum support staff, budget specialists, and others—play other important roles in the complex work of implementing district instructional reforms. As districts

become more explicit about their intent to impact teaching and learning in the classroom, new frameworks and lenses are needed for examining district roles and for looking at the role of individuals who work for school districts administering or managing programs or services.

Building on scholarship from within and outside of education, we propose a re-conception of the work of mid-level district staff from a communities of practice perspective. From this perspective, mid-level central office staff occupy a strategic position in between the innovations unfolding inside the schools, within and across different central office departments, and beyond. We term this work brokering and identify an array of activities through which mid-level staff broker resources, knowledge, and ideas within and across the district.

The research presented below takes an in-depth look at the role of middle-level staff and how they interact with principals, teachers and other school-level administrators. In this report, we shed light on the work of these mid-level staff members by describing their functions and by looking at two different orientations that they bring to their interactions with schools. In our analysis, we found that the vast majority of mid-level central office staff brought an authoritative orientation to their interactions with schools. Nearly

a quarter of mid-level managers, however, used a collaborative orientation towards working with schools which we see as vital to creating communities of practice around instructional reform. We will explore communities of practice in greater detail later in this paper.

## Mid-Level Central Office Staff: Pivotal Actors in Instructional Reform

**W**hile superintendents and their reform agendas regularly make the front page, mid-level staff rarely solicit much notice from the press and academics. From the perspective of school staff, however, mid-level staff members are pivotal policy actors in district reforms. In our study, the majority of mid-level central office and school staff members have worked for their districts for well over a decade. They have witnessed the arrival and departure of several superintendents and school board members. Principals, assistant principals and other school staff view mid-level district staff as important fixtures in systems where superintendents and reforms agendas can change overnight. She described her role in relationship to changing district leadership in this way:

**We have had tremendous turnover in top leadership. We have had three superintendents, four chief academic officers and a while when no one was [in the position of chief academic officer]. So it's been challenging. And they come in and they want to have their project, so it has been very challenging. Each time somebody new comes in, we have to re-educate them on what this is about.**

Across the three districts that we studied, principals depicted mid-level and school staff as facing similar challenges as a result of constant changes in top leadership and reform agendas. One principal remarked:

**I think the last seven, eight, nine years, we've had a very large amount of turnover on the board and in every instance there has been a new superintendent [holding the position for] less than the national average of three years. With every new superintendent, the new board's agenda has always been a major reshuffling and focus. Because of that we just start on certain initiatives—and here is where I don't fault [central office mid-level staff]—and they get rolling with it, about to implement it and then bang, we've got another superintendent.**

School staff also identified mid-level district staff as sources of a constant streams of emails, faxes, and memoranda. Across districts, school leaders reported that they devoted substantial

time to reviewing documents sent by these offices and responding to their requests. For example, in describing his responsibilities, a principal commented:

**[The role of principal] is always difficult. The central office has many departments. And I don't think that one department is connected with the other one—so we're just doing paperwork here for the central office. Surveys—every single day, we have surveys. I have one due on Friday for the Professional Development Department. I have another one due Tuesday for the people in Health. I had a meeting here with my people taking notes and putting all the information on the computer.**

While mid-level managers work from inside of central office, many have come up through the ranks and have maintained working relationships with school principals. For example, a central office staff member in a mathematics and science department described her director as a critical link between the office and school staff. The director oversees one of the largest integrated mathematics and science initiatives in the country and yet his staff member described him in the following way:

**[He is] a former principal and administrator, so he knows quite a few principals and he can just get on the phone and call them and say, 'Hey, you know, what's up? Where are you going? Can we come out and give you additional support?' and things of that nature.**

Remarks about the importance of trust with school staff were common in interviews with central office administrators. One administrator commented on her close association with schools: “There’s not a school in [our district] that I haven’t been in, that I don’t know and can’t make my way around. So I have an appreciation for that.” She views these interactions as the foundation of her efficacy rather than something schools simply need, explaining, “That’s what [my work] gets down to. It comes down to trust and you build that from your past experiences.”

District staff emerged from these and other school-level accounts as important policy players who translate, coordinate, and work to align superintendents’ reform agendas and district reform activities within schools.

“[The role of principal] is always difficult. The central office has many departments. And I don’t think that one department is connected with the other one—so we’re just doing paperwork here for the central office. Surveys—every single day, we have surveys.”

## Research Context and Definitions

This paper is the first report from a larger, qualitative study of district/school interactions conducted by the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform. The goal of this report is to examine and illuminate the essential leadership roles that mid-level staff play in implementing instructional reforms. *Leading From the Middle* represents the first step in developing a dialogue about strengthening relationships between mid-level district staff and school leaders working in urban public schools.

Each of the three school districts that we studied—Chicago, Milwaukee, and Seattle—had promising systemic instructional initiatives underway as well as experience in decentralizing authority and resources to schools: Chicago, through democratic localism based on site-based and shared decision-making; Milwaukee, through a substantial school choice program, resource reallocation strategies, and actions to restructure the district into a cost-for-service center; and Seattle, through needs-based funding and school-site, standards-based improvement efforts.

In this analysis, we define mid-level central office staff as individuals who work full-time for the district administering or managing programs or services. We excluded individuals occupying top cabinet-level positions such as deputy superintendents and chief education officers. At the school level, we drew upon interviews from school administrators including principals, assistant principals, curriculum and program coordinators, etc. For the purposes of this report, we call these individuals “school staff.” Based on teacher interviews in all three cities, we found that classroom teachers had little, if any, direct interaction with central office staff. Consequently, we did not utilize those interviews for this report. Forthcoming reports will reflect teacher voice.

This report is based on people’s accounts and perceptions of their own work and the work of others. As might be expected, the views of central office staff and school staff members converged at times and deviated considerably at other times. Our hope is that this report will provoke conversations among policy-makers, educators, academics, and reformers and provide direction in thinking in new and productive ways about the district’s role in instructional change. The Cross City Campaign does not assert that the perceptions or experiences surfaced in this report are statistically representative of the districts as a whole. However, the perceptions and experiences reflected here represent those that were prevalent among our interview subjects.

A description of research design and methodology can be found in Appendix B.

## Mid-Level Central Office Staff as Brokers

**M**id-level managers may work deep inside the central office but they are connected in important ways to innovations and ideas emanating from outside the central office. Eighty percent of mid-level district staff reported that aspects of their work involving instructional improvement are conducted with other central office departments, school staff, or reform and research organizations outside the district. They have the most frequent contact with the schools around the districts' instructional agenda and, as a result, they are strategically positioned to serve as brokers of information, ideas, and resources among these various communities (schools, central office, and outside experts).

As brokers, mid-level staff design tools, manage data, provide training, and build networks that help teachers and principals, district staff, outside researchers and reformers, among others, coordinate their work and pool expertise.

Borrowing from the work of socio-cultural theorist Etienne Wenger, we refer to this work of mid-level central office staff as "brokering." Wenger's studies of the private sector define brokers as people who are at the intersection of multiple domains, people who act as knowledge brokers or translators because they have membership in multiple communities (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

In the practice of district instructional reform, brokering involves much more than a transfer of information from one setting to the next. As brokers, mid-level staff design tools, manage data, provide training, and build networks that help teachers and principals, district staff, outside researchers and reformers, among others, coordinate their work and pool expertise. The activities that mid-level central office managers perform as brokers include:

- 1) creating tools that communicate district policies to schools;
- 2) managing information and data in order to make it accessible in ways that help teachers and principals use it to improve instruction;
- 3) designing training and staff development for principals, school-level administrators and teachers; and
- 4) cultivating relationships that help people share expertise. From this perspective, central office staff assume roles that extend far beyond the more familiar tasks of monitoring school-level compliance and enforcing mandates. Table 1 describes these four brokering roles.

Mid-level central office staff generally do not work directly alongside classroom teachers, nor do they create policy. They do, however, strongly influence how principals, school administrators, and teachers experience district instructional improvement policies. From this perspective, mid-level central office staff sit at the intersection of important reform activities, placing them in a unique position to make connections between policy and practice.



**Table 1. How Mid-Level Central Office Staff Serve as Brokers**

<b>Their Role as Brokers</b>	<b>Brokering Examples</b>
<p><b>Tool Designer:</b> Translate reform agendas into tangible materials for schools to use.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Create handbooks, rubrics, and evaluation protocols.</li> <li>■ Revise or create school planning templates.</li> <li>■ Adapt externally developed curricular materials for use within district reforms.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Data Manager:</b> Work with implementation and student outcome data to help teachers and principals improve instruction.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Review and provide feedback on school improvement plans.</li> <li>■ Hold meetings to discuss test score data with school staff.</li> <li>■ Compile student enrollment or budget data and distribute.</li> <li>■ Monitor school compliance with requirements and regulations.</li> <li>■ Conduct principal evaluations.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Trainer and Support Provider:</b> Design staff development and training to support instructional leadership at different levels.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Organize principal training in response to new agenda.</li> <li>■ Lead workshops on best practices for teacher leaders.</li> <li>■ Design and conduct workshops for school-based planning teams and parents.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Network Builder:</b> Create routines and practices that build or sustain connections between people who have expertise to share but little contact.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Write and participate in grants that create new partnerships for the district and for individual schools.</li> <li>■ Help obtain information for individual school staff from other central office departments.</li> <li>■ Organize meetings or design processes for helping school staff to share ideas and problem-solve.</li> </ul>

Note: These categories are based on interviews with 55 mid-level district staff and their descriptions of their work.

## Brokering Roles

**B**rokering represents a fundamental activity in the work of most mid-level administrators, regardless of the central office department or even the school district in which they work. The examples below expand on the descriptions of brokering activities provided in Table 1. It is important to note that our analysis does not evaluate the effectiveness of mid-level staff in performing these roles but does establish a broader scope of work that often goes unrecognized.

**Tool Designers:** Seventy-eight percent of district staff viewed tool designing as an important form of instructional support. As material designers, mid-level district staff wrote handbooks and guides outlining new policy changes, tailored these guides to particular grade levels and subject areas, or revised them for new teachers and parents. They designed or revised templates for use by school-based teams in planning programs and activities to improve instruction. They adapted materials developed externally, such as those developed in other states, for use within their own districts.

Through the design of materials, mid-level district staff set guidelines and regulations but also developed strategies for helping school personnel make sense of macro-policy goals. For

example, in describing why his office spent so much time creating teacher guides, parent guides, rubrics, and videotapes, a curriculum director explained:

**Because it's not just the theoretical piece that [school staff] are interested in. They want to know how all of this translates into what I'm supposed to be doing and into what I should expect from my parents and my students. [Principals and teachers] understand [the district leader's] reason is important. They understand that we need to do something to change our practices. [School staff] tell us, 'How do we go about doing that?' And that is what we are in the process of trying to do.**

**Data Managers:** Across the three districts, seventy-eight percent of district staff described interactions with schools in relationship to reform implementation. This involved reviewing test-score data as part of school and principal evaluations and working with student-outcome data to help school-level and other district-level staff interpret and use the data as part of ongoing decision-making. For example, a reading specialist analyzed students' yearly growth on specific items and put this information on a computer so teachers could access it. Another mid-level staff person provided written and oral feedback to school leadership teams on their school action plans.

We term this work data management rather than compliance monitoring because it involved, for some district staff, much more than the latter term connotes such as: a) reviewing and providing feedback to school teams on the content of their school improvement plans; b) compiling demographic data on schools and putting it on web sites for community use; and c) meeting with department chairs to review test-score data and to talk about teachers' professional development needs.<sup>2</sup>

### **Trainers and Support Providers:**

While this is the role that most people equate with central offices staff when it comes to instruction, only fifty-three percent of district staff said they provided training and support to school administrators and teachers. Examples of this include: organizing training for principals in response to new reform agendas; leading workshops in new writing strategies for teacher leaders; designing and conducting workshops for school-based planning teams and for parents groups concerned with standards; or by providing technical support through informal on-going interactions with school staff. For instance, one administrator met with outside professional developers to discuss how they might better align their work with the district's new instructional agenda. Another took cross-cutting issues emerging from her observation of teacher leader meetings to structure seminars for principals on instructional leadership.



**Network Builders:** Sixty-four percent of mid-level district staff described their work as building and sustaining connections between people who have expertise to share but without much contact. Among other things, this work involved developing and participating in grants. As an example, district managers in one district played a leading role in the development of three major grant-funded initiatives. These grants established new and multi-year partnerships between the district, a local school of education, a national alliance of school administrators, and a major federal research and development center bringing new professional learning opportunities into the district. Mid-level district staff also described organizing meetings and developing processes within meetings to help leaders across schools share ideas and problem-solve.

A primary goal of brokering for central office administrators who use a collaborative approach is to help district staff learn from schools' expertise and reform experiences.

## Contrasting Orientations to Brokering

**B**ased on the accounts of district staff, we identified two different views that mid-level staff have about where expertise for reform resides. Because of these differing orientations, they approach their roles in two distinctly different ways:

1. Mid-level staff with an **authoritative orientation** treat principals, teachers, and other school staff primarily as targets of expertise and direction from experts outside the school. From this perspective, a primary goal of brokering is to cultivate exchanges that channel expertise to schools.
2. Mid-level staff with a **collaborative orientation** view principals, teachers, and other school staff as sources of expertise that contribute to how policies are interpreted and implemented. From this perspective, a primary goal of brokering is to foster exchanges that help central office staff learn from and become more informed by schools' expertise and reform experiences.

Our use of the term "collaborative orientation" is drawn from Donald

Norman's research on product design and his call for designing products based on the needs and interests of the user (Norman, 1988). Norman advocates for a collaborative-centered approach in which designers and users are co-learners in developing innovations.<sup>3</sup>

The vast majority of mid-level central office staff interviewed brought an authoritative orientation to their interactions with schools. They tended to view principals, teachers, and other school staff primarily as the beneficiaries of other people's expertise. From this perspective, the fundamental goal of brokering activities is to channel expertise *to* schools.

A smaller number of mid-level central office staff had a different, more collaborative orientation. These mid-level managers viewed themselves as a bridge in the flow of expertise back and forth between district office, schools, and outside reformers and researchers. From this perspective, school personnel are not simply targets of policy change but substantive sources of expertise for people working on instructional improvement in other settings and at higher levels. A primary goal of brokering for central office administrators who use a collaborative approach is to help district staff learn from schools' expertise and reform experiences.

**Table 2. Brokering Role Orientations**

Brokering Roles	Authoritative Orientation	Collaborative Orientation
<b>Tool Designers</b>	Believe they understand schools’ needs and can design tools without their substantive input.	Identify and emphasize the role of school staff as important sources of expertise in tool design.
<b>Data Managers</b>	Emphasize their role in monitoring schools’ collection and timely submission of data.	Emphasize their role in coaching school staff in interpreting and using data to improve instruction.
<b>Training and Support Providers</b>	Emphasize their role as trainers of principals and teachers in reform implementation and the scale of district training.	Also emphasize the need for training of district staff as part of reforms.
<b>Network Builders</b>	Identify the central office or non-district support staff as the primary source of technical support for schools in reform implementation.	Also identify cross-school or cross-role networks as critical sources of technical support in reform implementation.

### Authoritative Orientation

The mid-level district staff who bring an authoritative orientation to their interactions with schools displayed little concern or interest in involving school personnel in tool design, data interpretation, training development, or network building. District staff in this category suggested they already possessed an adequate understanding of school needs—in their view—making it possible to design materials and practices without the substantive

input of school staff. These staff members made statements such as, “While we didn’t do an actual formal needs assessment, I know we have a pretty accurate picture of what’s going on.” Central office staff who utilized an authoritative orientation also depicted teachers as having uniform needs that changed little over time as reflected in the following comment: “Having spent so much time in schools, you start to just know what teachers need...things like how to do cooperative learning, how to develop assessments.”

The mid-level district staff who bring an authoritative orientation to their interactions with schools displayed little concern or interest in involving school personnel in tool design, data interpretation, training development, or network building.

In their accounts, these mid-level managers who designed tools also tended to dismiss schools' criticisms in reaction to tools. A central office staff person communicated this disregard when stating:

My first step was to give [schools] a tool, because you can't train all of them, 1,500 elementary teachers step-by-step in what it would take a couple of college courses to do. So the first was to give them a tool and then to train them in it. And the reception has been warm to the text. I have heard some teachers say, 'It's too much. I can't do all this.' But of course if they don't do it, students won't have the right skills.

His authoritative orientation is evident when he interprets the challenges of the new district curriculum as an implementation failure on the teachers' part rather than an inherent flaw in the design of the tool itself.

One administrator with an authoritative orientation to data management offered the following description of her work, "My first obligation, and one that's very time consuming, is implementing the principal evaluation process." She commented that the evaluations were based on "whether the principal has made satisfactory progress around the goals the school has established in there." Recalling one meeting she said:

I spent one entire meeting on, and had the reading people come and talk about, what do we mean by a bal-

anced, standards-based, vertically articulated reading program. I have followed that up with a worksheet that I have provided for principals to say if you have some other way of documenting, fine, but if you don't, here is something that you could use to demonstrate that.

She proceeded to acknowledge what she perceived as the limits of the worksheet: "But I still can't verify that what they are telling me is truth in practice." Again, this administrator's remarks reflect certain views about school and district roles. The central office administrator is playing a brokering role in the sense that she coordinates the exchange of data and information between schools and the district. However, there is little apparent interest on her part in helping schools interpret and use the implementation data.

Similarly, a central-office staff person from another district employs an authoritative orientation to data management in describing his work with principals:

This is a more supportive process. We are not out to say whether this school is doing a good job or a bad job. This is only to help them make sure that they are in compliance. We review the attendance book and where there are weaknesses or where there are not. They have to have accuracy—accurate information and we are providing a supportive role to the school.

Central office staff reflecting an authoritative orientation to training and support made limited or no reference to what central office staff might need to learn in order to help school administrators and teachers meet the demands of district reform agendas.

When asked for an example of how this office would provide follow-up support, he gave this answer:

We let [the office of curriculum and instruction] know whether the school is using updated material or let the office dealing with attendance know that [they] need to explore this because [the school's staff] are not filling out attendance books accurately.... So it's supportive again, when we see a need, we will report them to other departments.

While this individual characterized the role he played as very supportive to schools, viewing his office as a critical link in channeling information between schools and other departments, he identified his primary responsibility as monitoring schools' collection of data and reporting problems to other departments.

Central office staff reflecting an authoritative orientation to training and support made limited or no reference to what central office staff might need to learn in order to help school administrators and teachers meet the demands of district reform agendas. The interview protocol used in conducting interviews with these staff members offered multiple opportunities for them to do so by asking them to identify priorities facing the district and their own department in strengthening supports for schools. For example, when asked to talk about the district's strategy for providing training and support around new accountability reforms, a mid-level central office administrator emphasized the numbers of schools and teachers participating in in-services. She said:

We invited the principal and two teachers plus a parent to the workshop so there was a team of four from every school. So that means that if we had a hundred schools, we'd have about four hundred participants. ... But there was a lot of training and we trained all of the schools that participated. We still have PowerPoint presentations and we still use these videotapes. If you look behind you, we've got videotapes on the quality[review] also that we sent to the schools, that we gave to the schools after they were trained. We cover all of the schools in the district. We made sure that we had them all checked for internal training. The other schools, they were all trained in the

**internal review process so there should not be a school that says I did not get training on the internal review.**

This district administrator made repeated references to the scale of training provided by the district, equating the quality of professional development with the number of staff development hours required of each teacher. She also stressed the role of the district in enforcing system-wide training. This mid-level staff person worked in an office overseeing the administration of state programs. While she did not work within the office of professional development, she emphasized training and support for instructional improvements at low-performing schools as an important dimension of her work. In her account, principals and classroom teachers were learners and district staff the experts who provided information to schools and monitored school-level participation in district-staff development.

[This central office manager] viewed the staff within the central office as a nerve center of technical support around implementation issues and made no mention of the “variety of experiences” and expertise at the school level.

Finally, reflecting an authoritative orientation to network building, two-thirds of mid-level staff included in this analysis identified the central office or third-party organizations as the primary source of technical support for schools throughout the reform process. We saw this reflected in statements such as “[Schools] rely on me to give them the facts because they can't really count on anyone else.” or “They call me when they want the true story behind something.” and “Granted there are problems that we can't solve, nobody can.” Note this account from one manager in central office:

**One of the biggest strengths we have coming from our office is that we have a variety of experiences within our office—bilingual background, high school principal, special education coordinator, special education teacher. We try to support schools in dealing with implementation issues. We have an office staff in here and we just enlarged it... We will put in the school facilitators from our office to attend a probation meeting, to attend the leadership meeting and provide assistance to the schools, simply who to contact at the central office.**

This central office manager identified numerous ways in which her office assists schools to implement district reforms. However, she viewed the staff within the central office as a nerve center of technical support around implementation issues and made no mention of the “variety of experiences” and expertise at the school level.

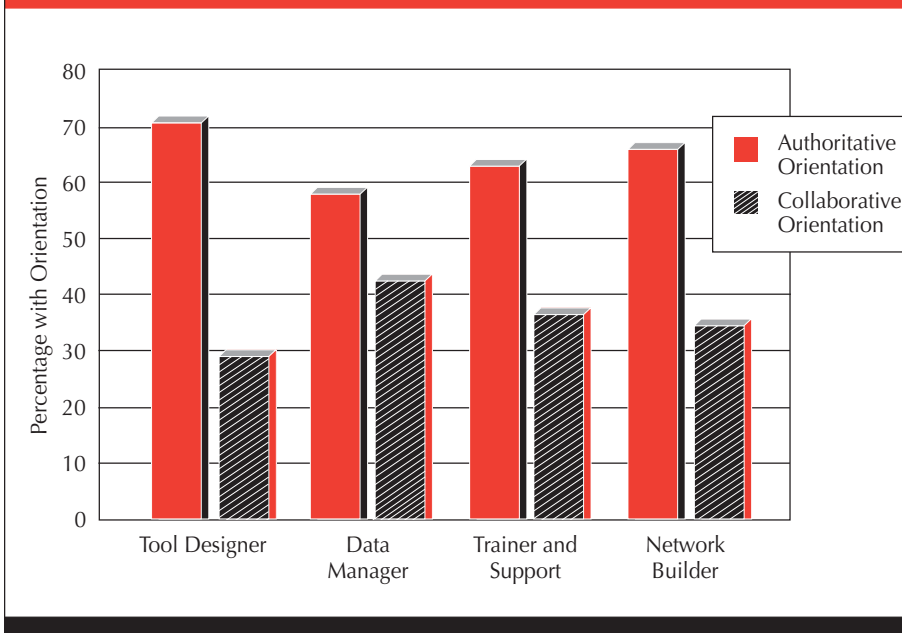
**Table 3: Mid-Level Staff Orientation as Brokers**

Table 3 offers a striking picture of the large numbers of mid-level central office staff interviewed in this study who displayed an authoritative orientation toward their work as brokers. We found:

- Seventy-one percent displayed an authoritative orientation to tool design.
- Fifty-eight percent brought an authoritative orientation to their role in collecting data from schools for use by other district staff.
- Sixty-three percent displayed an authoritative orientation when describing their work in designing training and support for school administrators and teachers.
- Sixty-six percent identified the central office or third-party organizations as the primary source of technical support for schools throughout the reform process, reflecting an authoritative orientation to their network building.

The presence of an authoritative orientation among central office staff is not in itself problematic. Any large organization requires attention to equity issues, standardized communication of district messages, consistent reporting of data across schools, and intervention in low-performing schools. District reforms clearly cannot survive without work of this sort. What is problematic, is the overwhelming predominance of an authoritative orientation within and across our district sample. Such district administrators limit opportunities for central office staff to learn from schools' reform encounters and to use this information to strengthen district-level policy.

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## Collaborative Orientation

By contrast, some district leaders in our sample who brought a collaborative orientation to their work adopted the explicit agenda of making central-office policies and practices more responsive to school-level needs. They identified school staff as important partners within their work. While collaborative-oriented central office staff played exactly the same brokering roles as authoritative staff, they appeared to construct their roles differently because they viewed school personnel as sources of expertise rather than simply targets of policy change.

For example, one principal supervisor described herself in the following manner:

[I am] an advocate for principals... making sure [principals'] points of view are represented or the impact that [reforms] would have on them is represented. Even if their perception or opinion is different than mine, [it is my responsibility] at least to present that in the conversations we have here at the central office.

Reflecting the perspective of collaborative-oriented central office staff, this administrator reported that part of her work is keeping lines of communication open in the hope that agendas will not needlessly collide. She also emphasized the importance of meetings that allow for time to talk about critical issues and for coordinating reform activities at the school and district level.

Having a collaborative orientation to tools design, this director of teacher training described the process she used in creating rubrics for standards by creating a teachers' committee to co-create the rubrics. She began by working with the teachers union to get a list of teachers to be on the committee.

**So the first thing that I asked them to do was to read the Charlotte Danielson book. I provided the book for them, they went home over winter break and read it. And when they came back, they sort of said, 'You know**

what? I see what's happening here. What we're really talking about is this is a document that belongs to teachers. This is something that we're creating so that we can have a clear vision of what we need to do to improve our classrooms. This is not about somebody doing something to us. This takes us to a different level as professionals.'

And then in March we started doing presentations. And the first ones we did were to the school directors. And to the senior staff, and to the teaching and learning division, which are all the people that work on curriculum instruction. And most importantly, to the [teachers' union] board of directors. And I had the teachers in the committee there. By the end of our work together, those same teachers who said, 'I don't want to tell my staff I'm here,' have been willing, ready, able, and happy doing presentations all over the district.

Collaborative-oriented data managers talked about the need to collect data in order to monitor school compliance. However, they also saw their role as one of coaching schools in the interpretation and use of data to improve instruction within their own buildings. When asked how he knew if a school is making progress in the literacy initiative, a central office reading coordinator responded:

We will look at growth in instruction. So when they take the IOWA test, if kids started out at 2.5 then we want him to have a 3.5 at the end of year. This information is in a computer [housed at the school]. I've already analyzed all the scores from the last several years. I have looked at growth across the grades. How you do that? Just asking a lot of questions, because you don't go in and say, 'Why didn't you as a teacher get four-months growth?' I went around and did a tremendous amount of listening. So I ask them what their opinions as teachers are about the problem. You know teachers are not always heard.

**"What we're really talking about is this is a document that belongs to teachers. This is something that we're creating so that we can have a clear vision of what we need to do to improve our classrooms. This is not about somebody doing something to us. This takes us to a different level as professionals."**

Such attitudes were also prevalent among district staff working within the professional development unit and within curriculum and instruction as evidenced in statements from this administrator:

Most teachers do not have science in their background and they should not be developing curriculum when they don't have a background in science. We wouldn't ask teachers without a background in reading to develop reading curriculum. Also, the professional development is just essential. First of all, teachers need science content. But there's pedagogy that's specific to inquiry-based science or standards-based science. And teachers need access to this. And we're in a fifth year of five years. The amount of positive feedback that we get from teachers is overwhelming. I've never seen anything like it before. The other thing that makes this different from many programs and initiatives is that this one is for all children, all schools.... So there's high-quality curriculum and professional development.

Teachers in this district reported that this initiative, which is a joint project of the district, a local university, and a national organization, was a rare exception to the stereotypical professional development offered within school districts.

**“One of my best ways of supporting principals is to help them utilize each other.”**

Mid-level central office people who brought a collaborative orientation to their work of network building identified cross-school or cross-role networks as critical sources of technical support in reform implementation. These supports were viewed as complementary rather than supplanting support received from the central office or other organizations. A principal supervisor's comments about district-sponsored principal meetings illustrates a collaborative orientation:

We use our cluster time too. We have cluster meetings once a month. And that's when I can do some training. But one of my best ways of supporting principals is to help them utilize each other. I have had principals who were really excellent in understanding the standards and how they were rolling out the standards in their buildings. I have principals who are really good at data so they have shared about data. I have principals who really understand what we are looking for in the new achievement plans. So, they discuss. So, it's just looking at how we can be resourceful from the central level and then first using their own talent and skills from each other.

In this case, the principal supervisor actively cultivated exchanges across schools. Interestingly, he understood these exchanges (and his role within them) as contributing to work within the schools as well as to district-level agendas. According to this mid-level supervisor, principals who understood the spirit of the new achievement planning process are networked with principals that have yet to engage fully in the process.

We found:

- Twenty-nine percent of mid-level central offices staff identified and emphasized the role of school staff as important sources of expertise in tool design, reflecting a collaborative orientation to their work.
- Forty-two percent displayed a collaborative orientation in their accounts of their work around data management and interpretation.
- Thirty-seven percent embraced this type of orientation to their work as trainers and support staff.
- Thirty-four percent identified cross-school or cross-role networks as critical sources of technical support in reform implementation, reflecting a collaborative orientation to community building.

As seen above, some mid-level managers who brought a collaborative orientation to their work sought out professional development for themselves. For example, a central office math and science consultant described how she and her staff assumed the role of learners in providing professional development to teachers. When asked how she delivers professional development, she responded:



If there's training that we have to have, we take the training. Several of us have gone to different training sessions. Then we come back and we collaborate within our group and we put our professional development package together, send it out, have it edited and refined. We have to then give it to [the assistant director]. We present it to [the assistant director] and the director for them to make sure we're on the straight and narrow.

In this account, the central office administrator first sought advice and support from colleagues and consultants working in the district before finalizing the development package. Likewise, a reading director suggested that training and support of reading specialists was a critical piece of reform implementation:

We want to make sure that these staff that have direct responsibility—in early childhood, bilingual, and special education—for giving support to schools, have these skills. One of the meetings we are having today, even with our reading specialists, we're focusing on coaching and mentoring. We want to ensure that reading specialists know how to work effectively with adults, how to interface with principals and others. The same thing goes for the other people on staff [in departments other than reading] as they go on to some schools. We are working on some professional development for them. That's going to be part of the reading initiative, provided externally.

The administrator here notes that the central office staff learn alongside teachers in the implementation of reading reforms, rather than strictly designing and delivering staff develop-

ment to teachers. Based on his collaborative orientation, this administrator realized that professional development must be closely aligned with the skills and knowledge expected of teachers under new reforms and should build the capacity of central office staff to work with school-level staff. While our analysis does not track the effectiveness of the professional development for central office staff, these are two rare examples where central office staff actually saw themselves as needing to learn more in order to effectively support schools.

The far too frequently used authoritative orientation to district policy implementation often creates barriers to effective interaction with schools and stymies efforts to improve instruction, turning what could have been powerful forces for change into missed opportunities. We argue that collaborative oriented mid-level staff who bring people to the table to pool their expertise and then translate this collective expertise into strategies, guidelines, tools, and procedures are more likely to be successful in making district instructional reforms relevant to classroom practice. As a result, we believe that the opportunity for an entire system of schools to succeed at improving teaching and learning can be strongly affected by mid-level central office staff creating communities of practice in which school personnel are partners with the district in determining how instructional policies are created, translated, and implemented.

We argue that collaborative oriented mid-level staff who bring people to the table to pool their expertise and then translate this collective expertise into strategies, guidelines, tools and procedures, are more likely to be successful in making district instructional reforms relevant to classroom practice.



## Communities of Practice from the Perspective of Mid-Level Staff

In spite of common stereotypes depicting mid-level managers as bureaucrats and fierce guardians of the status quo removed from the realities of schools and exciting developments within the field, and in spite of the prevalence of authoritative orientations to their work, mid-level staff painted a different picture of themselves. Many of them reported that they cultivated and valued relationships at multiple levels and across departments. These self-perceptions offer an important opportunity to move district staff towards a more collaborative orientation to their work—one that will potentially strengthen district/school relationships resulting in instructional improvement. The following descriptions exemplify the potential of district collaborations to improve instruction that we believe should be nurtured and supported. These relationships resemble what scholars of organizational innovation have called “communities of practice.” Before exploring these patterns, let us briefly explain what we mean by a community of practice.

### What is a Community of Practice?

Because of our focus on district/school interactions, we use a framework drawn from Wenger’s work on communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). His pioneering work looks at interactions and relationships between people, the connections people make across work places and from different organizations, and the collective knowledge they build.

Drawing on Wenger’s definition, a community of practice refers to the informal relationships that school administrators, teachers, district staff, and third parties such as foundations, universities, and school reform organizations cultivate in order to improve the quality of teaching across all schools within a city. The central activity of a community of practice is to gather expertise and create processes and practices (we refer to as tools) in order to support and sustain collective work around a shared agenda.

Following Wenger’s definition, we distinguish a community of practice from a network in two ways. First, a community of practice has shared goals, common concerns, and a set of topics or issues that its members care deeply about and want to address. Secondly, a community of practice works together to create processes and practices to support their work.

The work of district reform thus becomes one of leveraging expertise residing at different levels of the system and expertise residing outside of the system in ways that can lead to measurable improvements in classrooms.

### Leveraging Knowledge

In the private sector, communities of practice are critical because they help companies pool expertise and leverage knowledge, resources, and ideas from within and outside their own walls to improve services and increase productivity. Having the expertise and capabilities to generate and implement innovative ideas is a critical factor in district instructional reform as well. Schools and districts are knowledge intense organizations where creating and sharing knowledge is essential. Improving the quality of instruction for all children requires knowledge and expertise that exceeds the capacity of any single individual or institution.

From this perspective, the district is one actor—albeit an important one—in supporting instructional improvements.

The district can create the conditions that allow principals, teachers, and other school staff to be successful at improving student achievement or can construct the barriers that hinder their chances for success. The work of district reform thus becomes one of leveraging expertise residing at different levels of the system and expertise residing outside of the system in ways that can lead to measurable improvements in classrooms.

This is somewhat different than framing the district's role in reform as one of pressure and support. Here the focus is not exclusively on the school (or teacher) as the object of pressure or support but on the quality and strength of relationships within, outside of, and across different levels of the system. Based on empirical evidence, we argue that mid-level district staff have a strategic role to play in creating communities of practice. In order to play the role effectively, however, districts must help their staff members fundamentally change how they interact with schools and change their views about school-level expertise that they bring to their work

## Three Communities of Practice

**B**ased on empirical evidence, we distinguish three communities that mid-level central office staff identify as important to their work: 1) relationships with other district office staff; 2) relationships with school staff; and 3) relationships with reformers and/or scholars working nationally or locally on instructional change. The descriptions below illustrate ways in which mid-level staff have successfully used communities of practice to advance reform agendas at both the school and district levels.

Here the community of practice involves individuals working at very different levels of the district, energized by a shared vision and focused on the development of practical tools to implement the district's reform ideas.

**Communities of practice formed within the central office:** Typically we imagine central office staff embedded in an organizational flow chart that channels their efforts up and down the system, thus limiting interaction with colleagues in other departments. Yet sixty-five percent of mid-level district staff characterized themselves as

frequently reaching across departmental boundaries for assistance in conceptualizing or executing new ideas. For example, one district staff person spoke about the importance of building a culture of teaching and learning throughout the district, a vision shared by an array of colleagues across departments from whom he regularly seeks advice. Among others, this informal group includes: teacher consultants in the district's technology office; the director of curriculum and instruction; a grade-level director; and an intern. Here the community of practice involves individuals working at very different levels of the district, energized by a shared vision and focused on the development of practical tools to implement the district's reform ideas. This particular administrator explained his enthusiasm and conviction in the process:

The role [standards] play right now is as a reminder and reference for teachers. We [referring to his network of district administrators] are committed to referencing all professional development to the standards. We are working them into the union's teacher-mentoring program as a foundation for peer observation and self-review and consulting teacher-mentor review. We're developing more public marketing campaign materials to go with posters and stuff. The vision that I think [colleagues] and I share is to have standards at the center of teaching practice in ways analogous to how they work for kids in the classroom. There's a huge opportunity for teaching as a profession.

This administrator describes himself as part of a district but also as part of a wider effort to professionalize teaching. He and his colleagues have their own vision for how this will take place in the district, emphasizing the need to integrate standards into the policy tools used at the school level.

***Communities of practice formed with school staff:*** While managers work from inside of central office, fifty-eight percent of the mid-level staff included in this analysis also recognized ongoing interactions with school staff, in particular principals, as a core part of their work.

Reflecting a fairly common perspective, an administrator reported that she sees school-level and district-level agendas as essentially on parallel tracks. Part of her work is keeping lines of communication open in the hope that agendas will not unnecessarily collide.

Reflecting this view, a central office mid-level manager who supervises principals described the work initiated by his office in the wake of a board decision:

**Right after the board adopted our assessment system, I told my staff that we needed to put together an assessment advisory committee because the principals are the ones to implement this assessment system. We are required to put the pieces together in a central sort of way, but they are the**

**ones that actually have to do it. We convened an Assessment Advisory Committee and began having meetings and talked about things like the assessment window. We talked about things like the scheduling of our assessments in buildings. We talked about things like what our reports should look like. And though we have not met often enough, we have had good constructive dialogues about schools' needs versus the needs for continuity at the district level.**

In contrast to those with a authoritative perspective, this collaborative-oriented district staff person viewed substantive conversation with school principals about the design of accountability practices as a necessary part of implementing the superintendent's agenda. He saw his office's work as creating occasions for district and school staff to have in-depth and honest conversations about overlap (or lack thereof) between district and school agendas.

***Communities of practice formed with individuals and organizations outside the district:*** Fifty-one percent of mid-level central office staff also identified themselves as part of a wider community of scholars and/or reformers working on instructional improvement. Consider the following description offered by a district staff person about her work on the district science initiative:



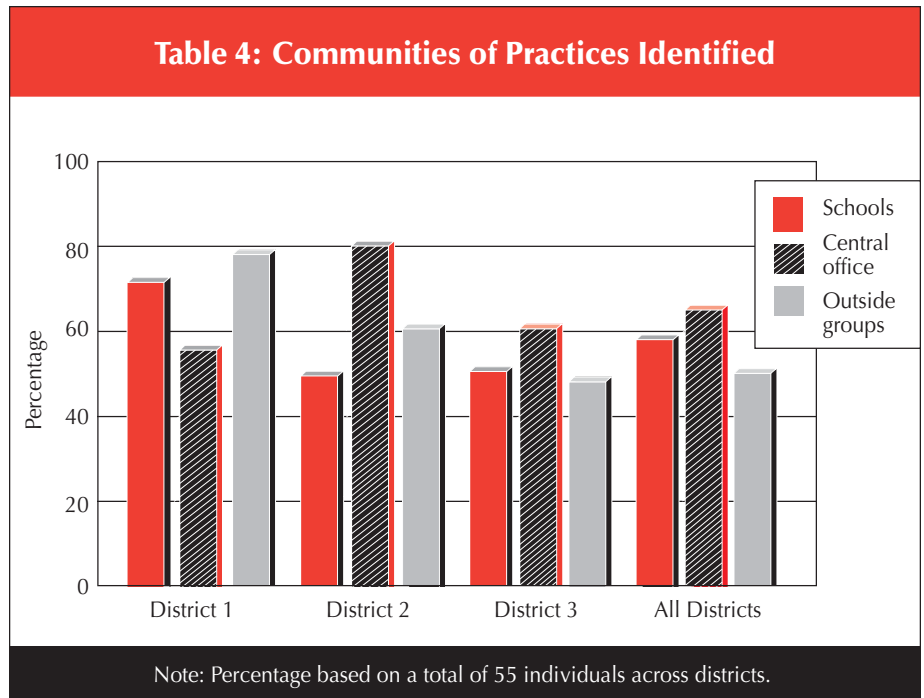
**We've learned from [scholars involved in evaluating their initiative]...that's been another form of professional development. They are evaluating six projects like ours, but they connect us with those other grants and two of their projects are very successful projects and they've connected us with them. We've gone down to work with them; they've come here. The CEO of the company writes a lot of documents and we use those as resources—it's been terrific. A real win-win situation.**

Like most others in the three districts, this district staff person is connected in important ways to innovations outside of the district. She understands these relationships as a source of professional learning but also characterizes her office as contributing to the work of science education reformers outside of the district. She relies on this community not simply for camaraderie, but to help her develop the tools for her work within the district.

As depicted in Table 4, mid-level staff from the three districts varied in their identifications of communities of practice. Seventy-eight percent of District 1 mid-level staff identified connections with outside organizations most often, followed closely by school staff (72%). Eighty-one percent of District 2 mid-level staff drew on expertise from central office colleagues. District 3 mid-level staff involved individuals from all three constituencies in their communities of practice with a slight preference for other central office staff.

### Emerging Stages

The predominance of an authoritative orientation among central office mid-level staff suggests that communities of practice between school staff and district administrators are in the early stages of development. From a collaborative perspective, the quality of



instructional support will only improve when both mid-level central office staff and school staff find value in their interactions. According to Wenger, this process takes time and careful cultivation so that relationships within and across a district “develop to a point where people genuinely trust each other, share knowledge that is truly useful and believe the community provides enough value that it has a good chance to survive” (Wenger, 1998).

Based on what we have learned, there is already a foundation on which to strengthen communities of practice between school staff and mid-level district staff.

- First, significant percentages of district staff perceive school staff as working with the district in important ways. They do not think school staff need to be convinced about the importance of focusing on instruction. In that sense, district staff view school staff members as part of the same team.
- For their part, school staff identify mid-level district staff as facing some of the same challenges they do, such as constant changes in policy priorities and superintendents. School staff appear to value mid-level district staff as anchors in the ongoing work of district reform and as landmarks within a constantly changing local policy landscape.
- In addition, across all three districts, groups of school and district staff members are experimenting with ways to pool expertise, taking steady, small steps to cultivate communities of practice that will improve outcomes for students.

Across all three districts, groups of school and district staff members are experimenting with ways to pool expertise, taking steady, small steps to cultivate communities of practice that will improve outcomes for students.

## Four Barriers that Prevent Change in Central Office Support to Schools

**B**ased on interviews with 59 school staff, we identified the following four areas that threaten to undermine the communities of practice emerging between school staff and mid-level district staff, thus threatening to undermine the quality of support provided by the district.

### 1. School Relationships Seen as Low Priorities

A common failure of communities of practice occurs when members allow other priorities to take away from the time they might spend interacting with one another. Under pressure from multiple directions, but particularly from above, mid-level district staff neglect their relationships with school staff. Forty-eight percent of school staff reported that mid-level staff members were difficult to reach. When asked about the quality of instructional supports available in her district, one principal claimed half jokingly that no one had seen or heard from a science director for over seven years, adding that, “They must be hiding somewhere although [they] are clearly on the payroll.”

In their accounts, district staff acknowledged that levels of contact could vary

significantly across schools and that there were periods during which they had little contact with schools. For some schools, communication of any sort was rare. Most district staff wanted more communication with school staff but felt burdened by the number of district-level meetings and administrative paperwork. One central administrator was representative of the general feeling among district staff of being overworked when she commented, “There needs to be about four or five of me and there’s only one.”

Similarly, when asked if he spent time in schools, another administrator from the same district acknowledged:

**Not nearly as much as I would intend. Yeah, that’s one of the greatest points of nervousness I have is trying to preserve a connectedness with the work. Just this morning I was due to be [at a school] and didn’t get there. I hate it when that happens.**

Echoing others, this administrator values regular contact with schools because it helps him stay connected to important issues, but he frequently finds himself canceling appointments with schools to address other district priorities.

From the perspective of school staff, however, some central office staff discourage contact with schools even when they have time. When asked about her interaction with the central office, one teacher leader responded,

“Well, teachers aren’t really welcome to interact with people at the central office.” When asked why she felt this way, she responded, “Oh, I could give you lots of examples” and offered the following illustration:

**A teacher called from another high school. It was getting close to test-taking time for writing portfolios and she asked if I knew what the due date for the portfolios was. So I called the language art specialist at the district and it took about four calls for me to get a call back.**

The teacher leader tried to contact someone at the district and became discouraged when her calls were not returned. She interpreted the lack of response as a sign that the district discourages teachers from seeking help.

When district staff do return calls and answer e-mails in a timely fashion, however, school staff view them as important and supportive colleagues. For example, a principal in the same district offered this glowing report of his interactions with mid-level district staff.

**When a controversy arises or challenges arise, dealing with a misconduct issue or something like that, I really turn to [the principal supervisor] to help me through it... I really turn to her and she’s been someone I can trust. She has been very helpful.**

The principal values the fact that the district staff person is available to deal with challenges as they arise. Similarly, another principal characterized district staff as supportive because they were dependable communicators, explaining:

*She is very helpful. We are more in touch with the administrators in this Region and they are always responding. So, that relationship is good. They are very supportive.*

## 2. Communications Based on Directives, Not Dialogue

Another failure of communities of practice is when communication is unidirectional and involves more directives than dialogue. When participants at one level of an organization sense that individuals at another level care little about dialogue, they also start to doubt the reality of shared goals. Based on accounts of school staff, many mid-level managers spend too much time communicating policy expectations and too little time in substantive conversation with school staff, listening carefully to their concerns. Only seventeen percent of school staff could recall a time when the focus of interaction with the district concerned an issue specific to their school, as opposed to an expectation that the district wanted to convey. In describing her interactions with the district, for example, one teacher leader commented:

*There's a lot of directives. There's, 'these are what you have to do.' I mean you get directives about this and that and the other thing.... There's no conversation. There's no 'why this is happening.'*

Like the overwhelming majority of school staff across the three districts, this teacher leader seeks opportunities for dialogue with district staff about her own work, rather than merely receiving directives. Similarly, when asked to characterize her relationship with the central office, an assistant principal from another district responded, “Very lonely.... They will dictate to you what you need to have done and give you timelines and all that, but as far as a relationship...”

In contrast, when central office staff were listening, school staff felt supported by the district. Consider the manner in which a principal of a school with a history of low test scores described her work with a district staff person:

*Based on accounts of school staff, many mid-level managers spend too much time communicating policy expectations and too little time in substantive conversation with school staff, listening carefully to their concerns.*

*We are constantly in dialogue [with a district staff person] in terms of disaggregating the test data, in terms of how students are grouped, what students we need to target, and how we will be able to get our test scores up.*

Perceiving interactions with district staff as directly complementing her work with teachers, the principal explained:

*Well, this is part of what we were already doing in-house. But this is also part of the probation piece. Yes, this would be an activity that I would do with my probation manager and also with [other district facilitators]. In turn, I also, at the beginning of the school year, work with the teachers so that the teachers can see exactly where their students are failing and which students.*

Furthermore, when asked about outcomes of her interactions with district administrators, the principal responded, “Yes, the district is helpful because it gives you—it’s always good to get other ideas in terms of how you can set up your program, or to get another way of looking at what you are doing.”

### 3. Administrators Lack Understanding of School Issues

Communities of practice depend on individual members having the opportunity to observe and connect with others on their own turf. Communities of practice fail when interactions focus too much on what Wenger refers to as “the public space of the community, large meetings, conferences, [and] Web postings” (Wenger, 1998). Connecting with individuals on their own turf involves much more than observing classrooms. It is experiencing what goes on in schools, sitting in on meetings, interacting with children and support staff, and experiencing first-hand the challenges and wonders that educators in city schools encounter every day.

School staff across districts commonly reported that school visits are an effective way of building strong district/school relationships. They reported, however, that a visit from a district staff member was rare. In one case, a principal contacted every staff person listed in the staff directory under curriculum and instruction because she wanted advice on how to implement the district’s new literacy initiative:

**Why wouldn’t I want a call-in? I want the help of the curriculum office to come and assist us. Every single [curriculum and instruction staff person] has received a phone call and to this day, none of them has ever stepped foot in this building.**

Like so many other school staff members, the principal desperately wanted someone from the district to come to her school, to get off the phone and computer and to walk the halls with her.

School staff also viewed school visits as creating opportunities for district staff to develop understandings that would help them become better evaluators and supervisors. They questioned how district staff could evaluate instructional progress solely on the basis of test scores or review of school improvement plans. Reflecting this view, one principal commented:

**We have a [principal supervisor] come in here and look at my school maybe twice a year. So to me, other than looking at my goals that I have to hand in or looking at the data that comes out from the state assessments and all that other stuff, I don’t see how those people could know about quality of instruction in the classrooms. I just feel that that’s when you’re talking about really getting to know a school, you have to spend time in there.**

Like many others, this principal views regular school visits by district staff as critical to district instructional support. In her view, without this form of interaction, district/school interactions fall far short of instructional support. Echoing this attitude, another principal lamented:

**Connecting with individuals on their own turf involves much more than observing classrooms. It is experiencing what goes on in schools, sitting in on meetings, interacting with children and support staff, and experiencing first-hand the challenges and wonders that educators in city schools encounter every day.**

Working with my [principal supervisor] and creating my portfolio really feels like a waste of time. If they were in buildings more often, they would know about what we are doing and wouldn’t have to ask us about the piddly stuff.

In instances where mid-level district staff took pains to visit schools, however, school staff characterized their work as exemplary—models of district support. The following interview with an assistant principal illustrates how valuable visits are to school staff. The transcription begins with the assistant principal acknowledging her great surprise when a district staff person offered to visit her classroom:

*Assistant Principal:* I said, “Gee, nobody ever offered to do anything like that before but what a great idea.”

*Interviewer:* Just the fact that she was going to come to your school?

*Assistant Principal:* Her attitude was that she thought, “Here is a school that needs something that maybe I have and so I’ll provide it to them.”

*Interviewer:* So that sticks out as a memorable interaction?

*Assistant Principal:* It did. In fact, I wrote her a thank you note just to stay in her good graces. She saw herself as all administrators should—as a quartermaster.

*Interviewer:* What does that mean, the quartermaster?

*Assistant Principal:* That they are behind the front lines but they acknowledge that the people at the front lines need support, resources, need accommodations to get that job done and that job will not be done anywhere except on the front lines. That’s of course the classroom. Very few administrators, I believe, see themselves that way.

When school staff felt district staff possessed knowledge of teaching and learning, they also tended to have high hopes for district reforms.

#### 4. Central Office Staff Lack Expertise Around Teaching and Learning

In order to thrive, communities of practice need to deliver information and resources to members that are of immediate value. Thus, from a communities-of-practice perspective, central office staff people need a substantive knowledge of the teaching and learning process—not simply what is taught but what it means, for example, to help students become better writers and readers or more able mathematical problem-solvers.

Across the three districts, school staff viewed central office staff members’ knowledge of teaching and learning as a weak link in district support. For example, while applauding the district’s new literacy agenda, a principal of a high performing school was skeptical that the reform would have any impact given the limited knowledge base of district staff. He said:

**We’re moving towards literacy and yet we have very few people in curriculum and instruction who know anything about literacy. [The literacy initiative] is a comedy of errors.**

Similarly, a high school principal reported that his teachers openly ridiculed the content area knowledge of mid-level staff and offered the following example, “ My English department chair has stopped bother-

ing to attend district meetings because the staff person there is incompetent.”

When school staff felt district staff possessed knowledge of teaching and learning, they also tended to have high hopes for district reforms. For example, a school leader praised a district staff person because she understood teaching and learning, which in her view, “Made it easier to jump onto the bandwagon [of the district instructional initiative] and begin putting more effort in supporting what was being done.” Likewise, in explaining why she felt the district played an important role in her school’s impressive rise in student achievement, one principal explicitly referred to the technical knowledge of a district curriculum manager:

**[She] had a full scope of understanding of what curriculum structure is. It was an array for services based on a high set of standards. When a new teacher comes to a building, he or she should have more than a general book that says children should multi-task.**

The school leader views capacity for district support as much weaker in the present era. She remains unconvinced that the current curriculum manager possesses knowledge of teaching and learning, commenting, “Has she once stood in front and offered a coherent vision of teaching and learning?”



## Conclusion

Over the past several decades, consensus has been growing that districts have substantive and productive roles to play in supporting instructional improvement in schools. However, much of the discussion thus far has focused on policy strategies at a macro-level such as articulating a district-wide theory of instruction, adopting coherent standards and investing more in professional development. Within this discussion, the roles, relations, views and tools used by mid-level district staff has remained something of a black box. We argue that this is problematic because school staff largely encounter and make sense of district reforms via activities and tools developed at this level. Further, school staff view mid-level district staff as relatively permanent fixtures in systems that otherwise appear to be in a constant state of flux.

Changes in the local policy landscape invite mid-level district staff to assume roles in instructional reforms that diverge somewhat from those emphasized in the past. In the public as well as private sector, the transfer of knowledge across different sectors (e.g. manufacturing, technology) and departments is increasingly viewed as the cornerstone of successful innovation. According to Brown and Gray, “Learning is clearly no longer synonymous with individual mastery...High-performance workscapes are built less through training and more through creating opportunities for collaboration

and continual renewal, usually through teams, communities, networks, or forums.”(Brown and Gray, 2004).

The transfer of knowledge or pooling of expertise across different settings is particularly critical in the work of district instructional reform. This is especially important as schools call for more support. Rather than increasing the size of central offices, districts need to utilize and leverage the expertise within the schools and outside the system. Improving instruction across city schools exceeds the capacity of any one institution, making it critical that people working on reforms at different levels and in different settings have the means to pool their expertise.

In the past, districts were assigned a central role in most aspects of the instructional enterprise. Today, third party organizations and school level teams have assumed important responsibilities traditionally assigned to the district such as designing and providing staff development. In this context, mid-



Improving instruction across city schools exceeds the capacity of any one institution, making it critical that people working on reforms at different levels and in different settings have the means to pool their expertise.

level staff confront difficult and urgent questions about what role they should play and where their expertise lies.

We have offered a perspective on central office work that represents a distinctly different way of thinking about the role of districts in instructional reform. We use a communities of practice perspective and re-conceptualize the work as brokering. In brokering, district offices are primarily responsible for cultivating the exchange of information and expertise within and across schools, between schools and third parties, and between instructional leaders working at the very top of the system and those running reforms from inside the schools.

At a time when schools and districts have come under increasing pressure to demonstrate improvements with diminishing resources for public education, mid-level central office staff people represent an important link in the exchanges upon which improvements in teaching and learning so clearly depend.

**APPENDIX A: District Demographics 2001-2002\***

	Chicago	Milwaukee	Seattle
City population	2,896,016	597,005	564,158
Number of public school students	437,418	97,762	47,449
Number of schools	597	208	124
% Students eligible for free and reduced lunch	81.9	75.4	40.8
% Amer. Indian/Alaska Native	0.2	1.0	2.6
% Asian/Pacific Islander	3.2	4.3	23.4
% Hispanic	35.8	16.1	10.8
% Black, non-Hispanic	51.3	60.3	23.1
% White, non-Hispanic	9.5	18.3	40.1

\*Source: Characteristics of the 100 Largest Public Elementary and Secondary School Districts in the United States: 2001-2002, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

**APPENDIX B: Research Design and Methodology**

Our study is based on data that includes interviews, observations, and document collection at both the school and central office levels in these three districts. Interviews were conducted during the 2001 and 2002 school years. We analyzed the data during the 2003 school year and supplemented it with follow-up interviews.

Interviews with 82 cabinet- and mid-level district staff focused on the roles and strategies that they viewed as important to their work, the challenges they faced, and the support they drew on in this work. The overall study also includes data collected from 185 school-level personnel representing 23 schools across three districts (11 elementary schools, four

middle schools and eight high schools). In each school, we interviewed eight to 10 school-level personnel including school administrators, teachers across different grade levels, and governance council members or parents. Interviews with school staff focused on the particular roles and strategies that school staff used in response to central-office pressures. These interviews and school documents were used to inform our understanding of the significance of these pressures for school staff.

**Coding and Analysis**

For this report, we used a subset of data from interviews with individuals from both the central office and schools. At the central-office level, we analyzed

interviews with 55 mid-level district staff. At the school level, we analyzed interviews with 59 individuals playing formal leadership roles within schools including principals, assistant principals, and curriculum and program directors, among others.

In specific, our sample of mid-level district staff represented a wide range of district departments including curriculum and instruction (18), research and assessment (4), budget and finance (2), categorical programs (3), professional development (9), units organized around a district’s specific reform agenda (4), offices specifically serving elementary, middle or high schools (9), and other administrative units (6).

These individuals occupied various professional “levels” within the district. Nine district staff occupied senior level positions, defined by job responsibility for multiple departments and/or units. Twenty-seven district staff managed one department or unit and a small number of staff. Nineteen district staff worked within a particular department and had some management responsibility as well as responsibility for providing direct services to schools.

This analysis is also based on interviews with school staff across three districts. This includes interviews with 23 principals, 16 assistant principals, five case managers/counselors, three librarians, three program directors, one business manager, five curriculum coordinators, one dean of students, and two special-program coordinators. We focused on school administrators as described above because of our theoretical interest in patterns of interaction and communication between district staff and schools and because a separate analysis revealed that classroom teachers have limited contact with the central office. School administrators—principals, assistant principals, curriculum coordinators, etc.—tended to be central office staff members’ primary contacts in schools.

Cross-site analysis for this paper occurred in several ways. We used a computer-based software program called NUD\*IST to code and index the data according to constructs derived from our theoretical framework. We field-tested codes to ensure inter-rater reliability. For the purposes of this paper, we focused our analysis on four main branches of the coding scheme using individuals’ descriptions of: 1) their roles and responsibilities in instructional improvement (what they claimed to do, not simply what one would expect from their

job titles); 2) their views of district and, in the case of school staff, school-level instructional priorities; 3) the tools (including the relationships and interactions) they employed or encountered as part of this work; and 4) the challenges they viewed as impeding this work.

Within these branches, we coded data further to build and test the core patterns represented in our findings. We indexed these codes by district, department, school, and job role using a cross-comparative method to test and refine assertions.

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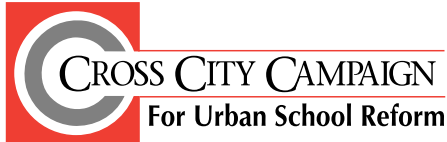
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<sup>1</sup> Staff members working in regions or sub-districts and at the central offices were treated as central office staff.

<sup>2</sup> Prior research has emphasized the central office role of monitoring and compliance. While shedding light on the prominence of command and control strategies, the research has ignored the range of activities that district staff can and do play in supporting instructional improvement. Changes in design of district reforms (in particular the move away from top-down approaches) require new frameworks and lenses for examining district roles. In our framework, monitoring and compliance need not be the primary emphasis of district’s work around outcome data. In a collaborative orientation, helping schools use and interpret data for their own purposes is as, if not more, critical.

<sup>3</sup> In defining these approaches we drew on research in both cognitive science and engineering on the psychology of innovation (Norman, 1988). This research makes a simple but important point. Innovation depends upon more than good ideas and new policy instruments. It depends heavily on the extent to which users can participate in the design of innovation and can tap resources within their immediate environment when encountering challenges. This orientation also views policy users and policy designers as co-learners in developing and refining innovations. Donald Norman talks about this orientation primarily in relationship to engineering technological innovation and terms it a collaborative-centered approach to innovation. However, his ideas apply in important ways to school-central office relationships. We use these principles as a framework to compare the approaches that central office administrators take to the practice of district instructional reform.

<sup>4</sup> By Wenger’s definition, communities of practice are: Groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems or passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting regularly. These people don’t necessarily work together every day but they meet because they find value in their interactions. As they spend time together, they typically share information, insights, and advice. They help each other solve problems. They discuss their situations, their aspirations, and their needs. They ponder common issues, explore ideas, and act as sounding boards. They may create tools, standards, generic designs, manuals, or other documents—or they may simply develop a tacit understanding that they share. Regardless, they accumulate knowledge and become informally bound by the value that they find learning together. This value is not merely instrumental for their work. It also engenders great personal satisfaction through belonging to and being understood by an interesting community. Over time, they develop a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches. They also develop personal relationships and established ways of interacting. They may even develop a common sense of identity. In short, they become a community of practice. In one sense, communities of practice are similar to networks in that they are constantly evolving both in terms of focus and in terms of the tools being developed. At the outset, for example, the community may be somewhat one-sided in terms of flow of information and expertise, with some members of the community either assuming or assumed to have more expertise than others. As members interact over time, this dynamic can and (as we argue above) should shift so that every member of the community participates both as learner and as teacher.



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