

Becoming a responsive system:

Transforming how the central office supports schools.

While school-level changes are important in improving student outcomes, a recent study focuses on changes at the administrative or “central office” level that may be equally important for transforming schools and students into high achievers.

The study examined three school districts that have shown gains in student achievement, and who credit those gains to efforts to radically change the way their education centre administration operates. The project conducted in-depth interviews with leaders in those districts to identify a common set of strategies.

These key strategies included:

- *A central and meaningful focus on improving teaching and learning.*
- *Changes that engaged everyone in the central office in change, not just those in a few departments such as curriculum and instruction.*
- *A fundamental reworking of the work practices and relationships of central administrators with their schools, to support teaching and learning improvements for all schools.*
- *An understanding that these administrative changes were a focus for reform in their own right.*

This administrative transformation went beyond a simple “restructuring” or top-down or bottom-up approach to change. It fundamentally changed what people in central administration actually do, day-in and day-out, to help improve teaching and learning for all students.

Central offices and the people who work in them are not simply part of the background noise in school improvement. Rather, school district central office administrators exercise essential leadership, in partnership with school leaders, to build capacity throughout public educational systems for teaching and learning improvements. Districts generally do not see district wide improvements in teaching and learning without substantial engagement by their central offices in helping all schools build their capacity for improvement.

Five dimensions of central office transformation in improving student outcomes:

Dimension 1: Learning-focused partnerships with school principals to deepen principals’ instructional leadership practice.

The heart of the transformative effort involved creating *direct, personal relationships between individual central administrators and school principals* that specifically focused on *helping every principal become a stronger educational leader*. Responsibility for ongoing support for principals’ instructional leadership became the main work of specific system leaders, whom the study called, collectively, Instructional Leadership Directors (ILDs)*. These staff were supposed to focus 100 percent of their time on helping school principals improve their practice.

Dimension 2: Assistance to the central administrator–principal partnerships.

Leaders throughout the central administration supported the work of the ILDs and the partnerships they formed with school leaders through the following intentional activities:

- *Providing professional development to the ILDs*
- *Taking issues off the ILDs’ plates that interfered with efforts to focus their work with principals in instructional leadership.*
- *Others in the central administration leading through, not over or around, the ILDs*
- *The system, not the ILDs, holding principals accountable for improving schools’ performance on annual performance measures.*

Dimension 3: Reorganizing and reculturing each administrative and service unit, to support the central office–principal partnerships and teaching and learning improvement.

* In the HWDSB the ILD is called an Organizational Leadership Principal

While the ILDs worked with principals on their instructional leadership practice, and other central office administrators supported those partnerships, this was only part of the change. Frontline staff of the other administrative and service units (to varying degrees) took steps to shift their own work to support teaching and learning improvement. These shifts included taking *case management* and *project management* approaches to their work.

Reorganizing and reculturing the central administration also involved *intentional efforts to develop the capacity of people throughout the central office to support teaching and learning improvement*.

Dimension 4: Stewardship of the overall central office transformation process.

Stewardship—or leadership to support the overall transformation process—also seemed essential to the implementation of central office transformation. Stewardship means that central office administrators *engaged in continuously developing the “theory of action” underlying central office transformation, while communicating it and engaging others in understanding it*.

Stewardship also featured *the strategic brokering of external resources and relationships to support the overall central administration transformation efforts*.

Dimension 5: Use of evidence throughout the central office to support continual improvement of work practices and relationships with schools.

Each one of the first four dimensions depended on a fifth dimension of transformed administrative practice: staff throughout the administration office engaging in particular forms of evidence-based decision-making.

However, more consequential to efforts to improve the quality of their own practice, *central office administrators engaged in the ongoing collection of evidence from their own experience with the transformation process and attempted to use lessons from experience to inform how they engaged in the other four dimensions of central office transformation*.

Moving forward:

These findings mark a departure from some calls for evidence-based decision-making that ask district leaders to rely almost exclusively on standardized test results and various forms of scientifically-based research to ground their decisions.

Overall, this study reveals that **central offices have vital roles to play in developing systems of support for district wide teaching and learning improvement**. This report concludes with a brief set of recommendations intended to be helpful for central office leaders who want to engage in central office transformation.

RECOMMENDATION 1. Include central office transformation as a focal point of a district wide reform effort and as a necessary complement to other improvement initiatives. District leaders should first understand that central office transformation is promising in its own right as an approach for improving teaching and learning district wide and embrace it not as a replacement for other reforms, but alongside other efforts that may already be in place in their districts.

RECOMMENDATION 2. Start the work of transformation by developing a theory of action for how central office practice in the particular local context contributes to improving teaching and learning, and plan to revise this theory as work unfolds. However central office leaders choose to begin and develop such a reform approach in their own setting, they should start with a theory of action that ties their first and ongoing steps clearly and directly to teaching and learning improvement.

RECOMMENDATION 3. Invest substantially in people to lead the work throughout the central office, and especially at the interface between the central office and schools. District leaders interested in central office transformation should not simply assume that their central offices are staffed with the right people for this work; or that the staff members who are already there are fully equipped to engage in new practices. Moving ahead with transformation efforts will likely require sustained investment in supporting ongoing learning among those who work in all parts of the central office.

RECOMMENDATION 4. Start engaging key stakeholders, political supporters, and potential funders in understanding that administrative transformation is important and requires sustained commitment. District leaders should consider what steps they will take to keep key stakeholders informed and supportive of these transformation efforts, and not just assume that people will understand why the focus on central office practice matters so much. Focusing on administrative practice is not the norm in reform conversations. Accordingly, leaders will need to articulate their theory of action and reform plans in terms that are compelling and understandable to the full range of stakeholders and others and lay the basis for an ongoing “reform conversation.”

This summary has been prepared for leaders in the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board by E-BEST, the Evidence Based Education and Services Team.

It is based on work from the Centre for the Study of Teaching and Policy at the University of Washington. For more details of this study, see the complete report at: http://depts.washington.edu/uwcel/news/ctp_cotdtli.pdf

