COMMENTARY

Sharpening the Reform Vision

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The Board of Education for the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) recently adopted Vision 2020 for Student Success, a long-range plan for improving performance and student outcomes.

One element of this plan is Support and Guidance from District Leadership, which describes the work of the district office as, "A central administration that facilitates the work of principals, teachers, and school communities." The plan proposes to enact the vision though the Community-Based School Reform Model, which gives schools and school clusters the flexibility to establish their own instructional strategies. The district office will provide support and guidance, and maintain accountability.

This plan positions the central office, as both coach and cop, but for now lacks critical detail. As SDUSD and other districts continue to sharpen their reform focus and envision new roles for the central office, careful examination and significant retooling may need to take place.

Until recently much of the work on school reform focused on the school site as the unit of attention/intervention. Within the last decade or so, though, due in no small part to No Child Left Behind, a growing body of work both acknowledges and formally examines the role the district office can play in supporting site level reforms. This work emphasizes the importance of a system-wide approach to improvement with district and sites, reorienting organizational structures and processes to align with reform goals across the organization. Creating greater alignment and coherence around reform policy is more likely when district offices and school sites develop explicit, shared theories of action, provide opportunities for mutual 'sense-making' around instructional strategies, and commit to clear consistent communication.

Redefining the role of the central office requires more than merely reworking the organizational chart or engaging in 'restructuring'. It will require a fundamental shift in the role of the central office towards direct support for learning and teaching. This is no easy task, especially for urban systems where often compliance and mandates rule. Schools in these districts are often passively disconnected, or worse, actively avoiding the district office, which may be viewed as more hindrance than help. If the district office has a key role to play in reform what kinds of changes need to take place?

First off, a clear, shared theory of action around learning must be established that guides the work, and provides the lens through which decisions and resources are allocated. In addition, while many district offices and schools are 'data rich' they are often 'information poor'. Building the data literacy capacity of both the district office and sites as producers and consumers of data will be critical. Establishing processes for how evidence is examined, leveraged, and diffused across a system in support of reform efforts is a lynchpin in this work.

Given that schools and clusters will potentially be engaging in different context-specific efforts, and principals have differing capacities in terms of leading instructional reform, the district will need to target differentiated support to build the capacity of

sites to do the work. Building capacity is often viewed as uni-directional, from district to site, but the capacity question is in fact much more complicated. It requires careful assessment, potential redistribution, and access to expertise both within and outside the district office, as well as in supporting individual schools.

Ultimately, as this work will require significant change in practices, the real question is who or what group at the central office will be taking responsibility for supporting principals in developing these practices that support outstanding instructional leadership?

The type of change proposed by SDUSD may be yet another in a long series of reforms unless careful attention is paid to the role of the district office. School reform does not result solely from formal technical plans, blueprints and compliance monitoring. Moving beyond regulatory relationships to more interdependent collaborative learning partnerships between the district office and sites is essential. The presence or lack of these relationships may well moderate, influence, and even determine the direction, speed, and depth of the reform effort.

Ensuring that SDUSD's improvement vision is really 2020 demands that the district look at the problem through the right glasses. Lenses that myopically focus solely on the school as the unit of change miss the importance of the larger frame and the potential role of the district office in transforming a system.

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