

## **The School District Role in Educational Change: A Review of the Literature**

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### **Historical Overview of Research on the District Role in Educational Change**

Research on the role of the school district in educational change is not new, though there has been a resurgence of inquiry and discussion about the district role in recent years. A key difference between the early and current research relates to variation in the policy contexts and change environments in which the research was conducted. Research on the role of the district in educational change in the 1970s and the 1980s was generally undertaken in relation to what Fullan characterized as the “innovation implementation” era of change (Fullan 1985). Researchers considered the role that districts played in supporting the implementation of specific government and district sponsored programs and practices. Berman and McLaughlin (1978), for example, found that some school districts adopted programs for bureaucratic (i.e., compliance) or opportunistic motives (e.g., access to funds, to appear “innovative”) and were less successful in facilitating the implementation into practice of those programs than districts that adopted programs as a means of solving previously identified problems in student and school performance. Louis, Rosenblum and Molitor (1981) also associated higher degree of program implementation and continuation with problem solving orientations and actions at the district level. Conceptually and practically, this research was problematic to the extent that it was interpreted as though districts and schools treated all changes equally and with equal success (Anderson, 1991). Research on how school districts and schools manage the reality of multiple innovations and continuous improvement was in its infancy at this time (Fullan, Anderson & Newton, 1986; Fullan, 1985; Anderson 1991; Wallace, 1991). A further gap in the research literature from this era stemmed from the focus on teacher implementation of new programs and practices as the dependent variable, and the relative lack of attention to evidence of impact on student learning. The linkage of leader actions to improvement in student learning remained hypothetical.

The innovation implementation era of educational change was supplemented in the 80’s and 90’s by the effective schools paradigm and by interest in various forms of restructuring (e.g., site based management, comprehensive school reform), typically under the banner of the “school as the unit of change”. Much of the basic research on characteristics of effective schools ignored the role of the district or identified districts as partly to blame for allowing ineffective schools to exist and persist along side a few so called effective schools (e.g., Edmonds 1979). Some reviewers of the effective schools research attempted to draw out implications and guidelines for school districts to help replicate the characteristics more widely (e.g., Cuban, 1984; Purkey & Smith, 1985), though the suggestions and conclusions were not actually based on studies of district

efforts to do so. Research on effective schools correlates led to state and district policies and projects intended to promote dissemination and replication of the characteristics of effective schools in many schools; this in turn led to research on the process and outcomes of the effective schools initiatives. Some of these studies, while still focusing on individual schools, did examine linkages to the school districts. Louis (1989), drawing upon a large scale survey and case studies of effective schools initiatives in urban secondary schools (Louis and Miles, 1990) identified four district-level approaches to school improvement varying in terms of the uniformity of process and outcomes intended: innovation implementation, evolutionary planning, goal-based accountability, and professional investment. A key finding from this and similar research on the district relations to school-based improvement processes (e.g., Berman et al, 1981; Rosenholtz, 1989) is that districts vary in approach and that the variation is associated with district leader conceptions of change process. Despite emerging clarity about district approaches to school improvement (as opposed to implementation of specific programs as in the innovation era), the measured links between the policies and strategies enacted by district leaders and the quality of student learning and teaching practices remained vague.

Two research studies stand out in this era, one in the United States and the other in Canada. Both of these studies were designed to identify the characteristics of academically effective school districts. Sample districts were selected for investigation and comparison on the basis of aggregate results of student performance on standardized tests, controlling for time, student characteristics, and in the Canadian study costs. The districts were not selected from a pool of districts known to be involved in effective school initiatives, though not surprisingly, the more effective districts in these samples were strongly focused and invested on improving the quality of teaching and learning. Murphy and Hallinger (1988) studied 12 high performing California school districts. They associated district effectiveness with strong instructionally-focused leadership from the superintendent and his/her administrative team, an emphasis on student achievement and improvement in teaching and learning, the establishment and enforcement of district goals for improvement, district-wide curriculum and textbook adoption, district advocacy and support for use of specific instructional strategies, deliberate selection of principals with curriculum knowledge and interpersonal skills, systematic monitoring of the consistency between district goals and expectations and school goals and implementation through principal accountability processes, direct personal involvement of superintendents in monitoring performance through school visits and meetings with principals, alignment of district resources for professional development with district goals for curriculum and instruction, systematic use of student testing and other data for district planning, goal setting, and tracking school performance, and generally positive relations between the central office, the school board, and local communities. LaRoque and Coleman (1990) studied district ethos and school accountability in a sample of ten British Columbia school districts. The sample included a mix of high to low performing districts. Their findings on district goals and accountability processes, particularly the personal leadership and involvement of superintendents, in the higher performing districts were quite consistent with those reported by Murphy and Hallinger in the California study. Other studies from this time period suggested that strong district influence on instructional decisions and practices in the classroom was not typical in

most districts . Floden et al (1988) surveyed district policy influence on the instructional decisions of fourth grade mathematics teachers in 20% of the districts (8 schools per district) across five states. They compared teacher responses in districts that emphasized central priorities and control versus support for autonomous curriculum decision making. Regardless of approach, the indicators of district policy influence were weak.

Attention to the school district role in improving the quality of teaching and learning subsided in the heyday of the restructuring era, especially in the context of policies that emphasized decentralization and school-based management as the engine for change. While Ross and Hannay (1998) investigated district influence on the implementation of site-based decision-making focused on restructuring the role of secondary school department heads in a Canadian school district, their study did not explore the consequences of change for classroom practice or student learning. Interestingly, they found that a strong district presence manifested in the reform vision and actions of a multi-stakeholder (district officials, teacher union, principals) steering committee played a significant role in the implementation of a decentralized reform effort that emphasized teacher empowerment! District support for schools included setting and communicating the vision, protecting funding, providing guidance, facilitating inter-school sharing, public recognition of school-level change efforts, adapting existing standard operating procedures as needed (e.g. teachers' contract), and assisting schools with processes for monitoring and reflection on progress. Collaboration between the district administration and local teacher union leaders was a unique feature of this role restructuring initiative.

The value of and need for school districts became subject to question during the restructuring era (Chubb and Moe, 1990). While districts as organizational entities remained intact in most of North America (they were abolished but later reinstated in the Canadian province of New Brunswick), school districts disappeared from the scene in New Zealand and school ties to local education authorities became optional in England. This fact alone serves to remind us that the school district is a political and organizational invention, not a natural and inevitable phenomenon, and that it is therefore quite reasonable to question and critique the role that districts can play in promoting and sustaining quality education (Elmore, 1993). Meta-analysis of research on the impact of site-based management (SBM) on improving student outcomes and teaching quality found little evidence that SBM produces much if any improvements in the quality of education in the absence of both pressure and support from district and state levels of education (Leithwood ). Recent case studies of high performing and improving school districts in the United States often portray contemporary district reform activities partly as a response to fragmentation and lack of coherence in program, student learning experiences and outcomes, and school-based improvement efforts associated with periods of district investment in decentralization and site-based management (e.g., Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Hightower et al, 2002).

Another stream of inquiry in the late 1980s revisited the district role in response to increasing state policy interventions such as curriculum standards, graduation requirements, standardized testing, teacher career ladders, and new licensure requirements. Contrary to predictions that growth in state policy meant a loss of district

control, researchers discovered that school district personnel continued to play an active role in interpreting and mediating school responses to state policy interventions (Furhman & Elmore, 1990; Firestone, 1989; Elmore, 1993). Traditional notions of resistance, compliance, and adaptation to state policies did not adequately capture the nature of district responses to the changing policy context. Districts, or at least the more proactive districts, were found to engage in a process of strategic interaction (Furhman, Clune & Elmore, 1988) where state policies were interpreted and used as opportunities to further local district priorities for change and improvement, resulting in an increase not a decrease in district-level policy activity, as well. While this research did not explore the links between district interventions and student learning, it did reaffirm the influence of districts on educational change, and set the stage for contemporary research on the district role in education reform.

Renewed attention to school districts since the mid-1990s reflects the emergence of standards-based reforms at the state level, demands for the success of all students, the increasingly high stakes test-centered accountability systems for school, teacher, and pupil performance, the lack of evidence that schools can accomplish these ambitious aims on their own, and the realization that district influence is unavoidable if not desirable. Several studies of district-level and district-wide efforts to improve schools sparked the current interest in the district role in school reform, and how it can be made effective. Spillane's (1996, 1998) case studies of school district and school responses to state education reforms in Michigan reaffirmed the active policy-shaping role of districts described earlier by Furhman and Elmore (1990). While he did not investigate the linkage between district policies and actions and student learning outcomes, his analysis did offer convincing evidence that school district personnel can exert a powerful influence on the kinds of instructional practices favored and supported across a district, and the degree of coherence (or confusion) in instructional guidance provided to teachers. The high profile story of decentralization in the Chicago public school system also contributed to the current interest in the role of districts as a positive force for change. The initial phase of decentralization of decision-making to school-community councils failed to produce significant widespread gains in student learning. It was only after the district began to reassert its role in providing capacity building, accountability, and innovation support to schools that improvements in learning began to emerge on a large scale (Bryk et al 1998 cited in Fullan 2001). Elmore and Burney's (1997) chronicle and analysis of Superintendent Anthony Alvarado's efforts to successfully transform New York City Community School District #2 from an average performing to one of the highest performing elementary school districts in the city really brought the district role to the forefront as a potentially positive force for change. The significance of the District#2 experience lay not only in the evidence of widespread improvements in student performance in reading and mathematics on district testing measures in an ethnically and economically diverse urban setting, but also in the fact that district leaders were able to demonstrate a well articulated long term strategy for improvement that emphasized instructionally-focused professional development, sustained system-wide focuses for improvement (e.g., reading, math), leadership, networking of local and external expertise, and decentralization of responsibility for implementation with high accountability for goal attainment by schools. In sum, these cases confirmed the evidence that districts do

matter, and that at least some districts “matter” in powerfully positive ways for student performance in large numbers of schools and for students of all sorts of backgrounds.

These studies provide a foreground to the recent array of individual and multi-site qualitative case study investigations of high performing and improving school districts that explicitly set out to isolate what is happening at the district level that might account for the reported success (mirroring early research on the attributes of effective schools, only at the district level). Much of this research has focused on districts serving communities with large numbers of students traditionally portrayed as low performing and hard-to-serve on the basis of ethno-cultural, socio-economic, and linguistic diversity. Much of the research has concentrated on large urban school districts. Most of the studies strive not only to depict key strategic policies and actions enacted at the district level associated with high levels of student performance, but also to account for how the districts moved from lower to higher performing, i.e., to tell the story of change. Key examples include Cawelti and Protheroe’s (2001) study of change in six school districts in four states, Snipes, Dolittle and Herlihy’s (2002) case studies of improvement in four urban school systems and states, Massell and Goertz’s (2002) investigation of standards-based reform in 23 school districts across eight states, McLaughlin and Talbert’s (2002) analysis of survey and case study data from three urban or metropolitan area California districts, and Togneri and Anderson’s (2003) cross-case investigation of five high poverty districts (four urban, one rural) from five states, and several single-site case studies of district success (e.g., Hightower, 2002; Snyder, 2002). These studies are complemented by other studies of the district role that are not limited to districts defined at the sampling stage as high performing or improving on the basis of student results (e.g., Spillane & Thompson, n.d.; Corcoran, Fuhman & Belcher, 2001). While there are differences in emphasis and detail across these and prior studies of district policies and actions associated with state and/or district-initiated district-wide reforms, there is a notable convergence in findings around common strategic principles and policy-linked actions correlated with “success”. Efforts to synthesize this research on the district role and effectiveness in creating the conditions for success in all schools for students in the current standards and accountability driven reform context are also beginning to appear (e.g., Marsh, 2002; Hightower et al, 2002).

### **Recent Case Studies of Successful Districts**

The review considers three areas of findings from research on district roles in reform, drawing particularly on the studies of claimed successful districts: the challenges confronting district efforts to implement system-wide improvements in student learning; district strategies for improving student learning; and the evidence of impact on the quality of teaching and learning.

Challenges faced by districts. Insomuch as much of the current research documents the experiences of districts that have “turned around” from a past history of low, mediocre, or at best uneven success (i.e., situations typified by large minority achievement gaps), it is not surprising that local educators point to particular leaders, circumstances, and

moments in district history when decisions were made to change the status quo in these districts. Researchers have identified a multiplicity of “challenges” to system-wide improvement that form part of the initial landscape for reform and which have to be addressed throughout the process of reform (they can’t all be solved at the outset). Snipes, Doolittle and Herlihy (2002), for example, identified seven challenges facing four large urban districts that had significantly improved the learning of their students. Unsatisfactory academic achievement, especially for minority and low income students, was the most fundamental challenge. These districts had a history of internal political conflict, factionalism, and tension, and a lack of focus on student achievement. Schools were staffed with a high proportion of inexperienced teachers, difficult working conditions, and students with serious social and educational challenges. Teacher turnover rates were high primarily because as young teachers gained experience they moved on to schools that were less difficult and where salaries were sometimes better. Disparity in the capacities of teaching staffs in schools serving different student populations contributed to achievement differences associated with diversity in student characteristics.

Superintendents attempting to reform these four districts also were challenged by the low expectations and lack of demanding curricula for lower income and minority students on the part of school personnel, which was in part a reflection of teacher perceptions of the lack of adequate district support to effectively address these students needs. A lack of instructional coherence within and across schools represented another common challenge. District leaders came to realize that they were pursuing a variety of sometimes contradictory educational programs with little alignment with state standards. Recent experience with site-based management had produced considerable variation across schools which often proved confusing to staff and was difficult for the district to support. This also produced fragmented professional development initiatives.

High student mobility was a challenge for schools in these districts, as it is in most contemporary urban schools. Students’ experience with varied curricula as they moved from school to school contributed significantly to their lack of success. Finally, the reform efforts of superintendents trying to turn around the performance of these districts was challenged by unsatisfactory business operations, including difficulty for teachers and administrators getting the basic necessities to operate schools and classrooms. Reform-minded superintendents found that many of their central office staff, promoted for reasons of seniority alone or political influence, did not necessarily have the will or skills to take on the challenge of system-wide improvement in student learning.

Many of the basic challenges described by Snipes and company have been reported in other case study investigations of district-wide improvement initiatives (e.g., Massell & Goertz, 2002). Togneri and Anderson (2003) identified several other major systemic challenges that had to be overcome through the process of change over time, including the willingness and capacity of many principals appointed under pre-reform regimes to carry out new expectations for instructional leadership in high accountability contexts. In the districts they studied, principals were placed in the spotlight of accountability for school and student success. District reform programs all emphasized in-service principal leadership development, and the recruitment and preparation of new principals from within the district. Similar to the case of NYC District #2, however, the first few years of reform in at least two of these districts also saw a large scale turnover in the principals. A second challenge for the districts studied by Togneri and Anderson and others is for

district leaders to figure out how to finance the reform efforts by reconfiguring existing organizational structures and budgets, seeking policy waivers, by doing away with programs and activities peripheral to the district reform priorities, by raising additional funds through local bond elections and contributions from the business community, by successfully competing for grants from state and federal governments and from foundations such as Wallace. Most of the recent research on district reform efforts fail to explain how much the reforms cost, where the money comes from, how those costs are distributed by function and over time, and what leaders do to make this all happen. A third challenge identified by Togneri and Anderson related to how district leaders dealt with traditional organizational structures, policies, and professional norms that created obstacles to restructuring of working conditions and support systems. Often these challenges became evident in the context of collective agreements that govern things like teacher hiring, placement, and transfers, teacher working conditions in the classroom (e.g., class size, instructional time) and school (e.g., workload, preparation time, length of working day), and professional support (teacher appraisal, professional development).

Future investigations of district and school leader reform roles and development need to examine more closely the challenges that emerge as the reforms proceed, not simply those that characterize the reforms at the beginning (cf Corcoran, Furhman & Belcher, 2001). Several studies, for example, have noted that initial reform initiatives tend to focus on elementary schools and on literacy and mathematics content areas, and that there is less evidence of district-wide success at the middle and secondary school levels, and with curriculum areas beyond the basic academic core of reading, writing, and math (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Hightower, 2002; Snipes, Doolittle & Herlihy, 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). A further challenge concerns how districts learn to respond effectively to disparities in school and teacher progress with implementation of reforms over time (Snyder's account of the New Haven Unified School District provides a good account of a district-wide professional development system that engages variation in teacher expertise as a resource to enhance instructional quality across the system).

District Strategies for Improving Student Learning. Discussion on the district role in change is complicated by a lack of consensus on the language for representing district actions and policies associated with educational reforms. District actions are portrayed as "policies" (Elmore, 1993), "principles" (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Resnick & Glennan, 2002), "characteristics" (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988), "strategies" (Massell & Goertz, 2002; Snipes, Doolittle & Herlihy, 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003), or by naming specific courses of action (e.g., establishing a common vision focused on improvement in student learning) without labeling them in terms of some levels or forms of intervention. Little distinction is made between general concepts, concrete actions, and formal policies. In this review, I use "strategy" as a cover term. Evidence suggests that successful school districts use a large repertoire of strategies to mobilize and support system-wide success in student learning, and that the impact of the strategies depends on their comprehensive use in a coordinated way, not the selective enactment of some over others or in isolation (e.g., Elmore & Burney, 1997; Snipes, Doolittle and Herlihy, 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). The literature is also ambiguous as to the linkages between the beliefs and actions of district and school

leaders and the formal policies (in whatever form) that are associated with district reform initiatives leading to improved teaching and learning.

This section summarizes evidence about how successful case districts went about “raising the bar” for the learning of all students and “closing the gap” between the learning of the most and least successful students. It seems premature in our understanding at this point, however, to assert causal, conditional, or temporal relations among district strategies and related conditions. Within a small sample of five districts, for example, Togneri and Anderson (2003) found three that began their reform efforts with an intensive work on curriculum alignment with an emphasis on school leadership development emerging at a later stage of reform progress. The other two focused initially on leadership development before turning their attention to concerns about curriculum alignment. Even this oversimplifies. Most analysts report that successful districts tend to work simultaneously on multiple dimensions of restructuring and change to support improvement in student learning, though certain areas may be focuses of more intensive district development and intervention at different times. Snipes, Doolittle and Herlihy (2002) argue that district success depends on the existence of certain preconditions (e.g., leadership stability, school boards that focus on policy governance rather than micro-management of district operations, consensus on shared visions for improvement in student learning and instruction, district capacity to diagnosis and respond to student learning needs by school, alignment of district resources with district priorities and support for change). The development of these conditions, however, can also be a focus of strategic action by district leaders. Three of the districts studied by Togneri and Anderson (2003), for example, organized (or offered) policy governance training for their school boards as an integral part of the reform process. Overall, the relationships among the strategies highlighted below remain poorly understood, which suggests a useful focus for research.

The common focuses of strategic action identified in the case study literature include:

*District-wide sense of efficacy.* Superintendents and other district-level leaders in academically successful school districts evince a strong belief in the capacity of school system personnel to achieve high standards of learning for all students, and high standards of teaching and leadership from all instructional and support personnel. This is marked by a willingness if not compulsion to identify poor performance (student, teacher, school) and other obstacles to success, to accept responsibility, and to seek solutions. How these leaders are able to communicate and develop this shared sense of efficacy across a district remains less well understood than the fact of its presence in these sites.

*District-wide focus on student achievement and the quality of instruction.* Not surprisingly, evidence of district-wide improvement and success for all categories of students and schools is more likely in districts which establish a clear focus on attaining high standards of student achievement. This goes beyond broad mission statements to the designation of explicit goals and targets for student performance and engagement (e.g., academic results on state/district measures of student learning, attendance, retention, high school graduation), with particular attention to closing performance gaps between lower and higher performing groups of students. Academically successful districts also tend to



emphasize instructional quality as one of the keys to improvement in student learning. The districts mobilize and align district and school operations, resources, and supports with these two focuses in the forefront -- student achievement and instructional quality.

*Adoption and commitment to district-wide performance standards.* At a minimum, the high performing districts highlighted in recent case studies pay serious attention to state-mandated standards for curriculum content, student, and school performance. Some develop or adopt district standards that mirror or even raise the bar beyond those set by the state. The standards and their attainment become synonymous with “success”. The pervasiveness of the standards movement extends beyond curriculum, school and student results in some districts to other components or dimensions of school reform efforts, such as standards for effective instruction, principal leadership and management, and professional development (Togneri and Anderson, 2003). Standards are key features of district performance monitoring and accountability systems as described below.

*Development/adoption of district-wide curricula and approaches to instruction.* Case studies of districts that have transformed themselves from low or mediocre to high performing systems (in terms of student results) often allude to pre-reform circumstances in which there was little consistency in curriculum content, curriculum delivery (i.e., instructional approaches), and curriculum materials between schools and even within schools in the same subject area. Such fragmentation and lack of coherence may have existed despite the existence of state-mandated curriculum standards, frameworks, and accountability measures (cf Spillane 1996 on the powerful mediating role of districts on state reforms), and were often associated with prior district commitments to decentralization and site-based school improvement without strong curriculum leadership from the district. Lack of consistency in curriculum hinders sharing of experiences between classrooms and schools, makes it difficult for students transferring among schools, and fragments district professional development efforts, all of which interfere with improvement in student learning. Current characterizations of effective districts normally highlight district efforts to establish greater coherence in curriculum content, materials, and to a certain extent delivery across the system. This can mean providing more support to understanding and use of state curriculum policies and/or developing local curriculum consistent with state curriculum policies. The emphasis on curriculum coherence often extends to advocacy and support for the use of specific instructional approaches and strategies said to work well with the content, learning outcomes, and learners in play.

*Alignment of curriculum, teaching and learning materials, and assessment to relevant standards.* The development or adoption of district-wide curricula and instructional materials takes place in the context of state/district standards for curriculum and learning. Thus, alignment of curriculum at the school and district level to these standards, and to district and state assessment programs (standardized tests) is a major focus of attention. Successful districts under these conditions are districts that can demonstrate that the curriculum taught mirrors the curriculum expected, and that assessments of student performance are consistent with both the expected content and performance standards.

*Multi-measure accountability systems and system-wide use of data to inform practice, to hold school and the district leaders accountable for results, and to monitor progress.* Successful districts in the current era of standards, standardized testing, and demands for evidence of the quality of performance invest considerable human, financial, and technical resources in developing their capacity to assess the performance of students, teachers, and schools, and to utilize these assessments to inform decision-making about needs and strategies for improvement, and progress towards goals, at the classroom, school, and district levels. The major common focus is on gathering and interpreting student assessment data, including results of state and district standardized testing programs, district endorsed diagnostic assessment processes, and student work samples, in relation to state/district standards and expectations for curriculum and learning. Many districts broaden the collection and use of data to other indicators of student performance (e.g., attendance, discipline, retention, graduation) and school/teacher performance (e.g., parent and student satisfaction surveys). Educators in these districts routinely justify their actions and goals for improvement from an evidence-base of student learning data. At the district level, the commitment to data-informed decision making linked to district standards translates into various supports for principals, teachers, as well as for district personnel and boards, to help them develop the capacity to use data and use it well. Examples include district-sponsored training in data use, providing tools and consultants to help with data analysis, and providing timely and user-friendly data feedback to schools. In developing their accountability systems, these districts often attempt to compensate for perceived deficits in state accountability systems which may provide insufficient data on student progress from year to year, or narrow measures of school performance. Finally, the accountability systems are created not only to gather and provide information on student, teacher, school, and district performance for planning, but also to hold educators at all levels of the system from the classroom to the boardroom accountable for progress towards district and school goals aligned with the standards. While accountability practices vary, principals bear the brunt of responsibility for school and teacher performance, and ultimately for student results in their buildings. Teacher accountability remains a less well developed and understood focus of district-wide action.

*Targeted and phased focuses of improvement.* Districts reported as succeeding in raising the performance of most students to acceptable standards are not accomplishing this in all curriculum content areas and at all grade levels at once. Case studies of these districts inevitably show that reform efforts are system-wide in the sense of affecting all schools, teachers, and students, but that initially they are typically targeted on specific curriculum content areas, such as literacy (reading, writing) and mathematics, and that interventions and support for reform typically begins in the elementary schools. Evidence of district-wide “success” at the middle and high school levels is less well documented (Togneri and Anderson, 2003). Some cases describe a gradual process of extending reform efforts to other curriculum areas (Elmore & Burney, 1997), though again the evidence is sparse. Analysts and practitioners emphasize the importance of having a concrete focus and goals for improvement embedded in the local curriculum, teaching, and learning milieu, and of sustaining this focus over a number of years in order to ensure that improvements have time to take hold and actually demonstrate effects in the classroom over the long term. Some analysts state that effective districts deliberately focus their efforts on the lowest

performing schools and classrooms. A more general finding would be that while low performing schools are likely to become objects of intense attention and support, district reform efforts and supports still apply across the board to all schools and classrooms.

*Investment in instructional leadership development at the school and district levels.* One of the hallmarks of districts that have succeeded in moving from low to high performing in terms of student performance is an intensive long-term investment in developing instructional leadership capacity at the school as well as at the district levels. At the school level these efforts focus at least on principals. In many such districts, however, reform efforts include the establishment of new school-based teacher leader positions to work closely with principals and with district consultants to provide professional development assistance (e.g., demonstrations, in-class coaching, facilitating school PD arrangements) to individual teachers and teams of teachers (grade level, cross-grades) in the targeted focuses of reform. These teacher leaders go under a variety of names -- instructional coaches, literacy coaches, resident teachers, skills specialists. The commonality is the recognition that principals alone cannot be expected to provide the intensity and frequency of school-based professional assistance that teachers require in order to implement significant changes in practice and student learning in the classroom. Professional development is also provided to teacher leaders in the content focuses of local reforms (e.g., curriculum standards and content, instructional strategies, analyzing student data) and in change process strategies (e.g., classroom coaching methods).

Principals, however, are the main priority for instructional leadership development in these districts. The emphasis is on helping principals develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to effectively engage with and support teachers in their efforts to assess student performance in relation to district/state standards and focuses for improvement, to involve teachers in developing school improvement plans focused on school needs in the context of district priorities for improvement, to become skilled at evidence-informed decision-making, and to become skilled observers and interpreters of the quality and progress of teaching and learning in their schools. Successful districts highlighted in recent case studies mount long-term professional development programs for practicing principals that typically involve a combination of off-site PD activities (e.g., summer institutes) and a variety of professional learning supports built into their regular working schedule throughout the year (e.g., monthly “principals conferences” led by superintendents and consultants; reform-focused professional support groups and networks of principals across the system; mentoring and coaching of new and struggling principals). Togneri and Anderson (2003) and other case study researchers report that many of these districts favor in-house principal leadership development programs over the kinds of generic licensure-oriented principal training programs typically offered at universities. This extends to the in-house recruitment and creation of local professional learning opportunities for promising principal candidates from the district teacher corps.

*District-wide job-embedded professional development focuses and supports for teachers.* Districts that believe that the quality of student learning is highly dependent on the quality of instruction organize themselves and their resources to support instructionally-focused professional learning for teachers. A new vision of effective in-service

professional development has emerged from education research on teacher learning in the context of innovation implementation and educational reform. In these districts, one-short workshops and talks by external experts, organized on the basis of individual teacher interests or the professional preferences of external consultants, delivered off-site or after work, with little or no organized follow-up and support in the classroom, and with no linkage to school or district goals for improvement in student learning and program are passé. These districts provide intensive off campus AND school-based professional development experiences and opportunities for practicing teachers, that typically combine input from external and local experts focused on school and district priorities for improvement, and justified by evidence of need (e.g., student assessment data). The learning experiences go beyond the conventional workshop format to include such things as teacher inter-visitations, demonstration lessons, in-class coaching, and teams of teachers doing lesson study, curriculum/lesson planning, and analysis of student work and assessment data. While the organizational and contractual challenges of providing this kind of school-based professional development as an integral part of teachers' work day are daunting, these kinds of professional development experiences are commonly associated with district success. Two additional features of these district-supported teacher development efforts are that they are usually marked by a sustained focus on instructional improvement linked to district reform priorities over more than one year (e.g., reading, mathematics), and that over time districts tend to grant increasing control to schools over PD decisions and management of PD resources, though respecting the integrity of district goals for improvement. Many of these districts mount or take advantage of state mentoring programs to induct new teachers into the teaching and learning practices being advocated through the reforms, and the district reform cultures.

*District-wide and school-level emphasis on teamwork and professional community.*

Collegial work groups (e.g., grade level teams, school improvement teams), sharing of expertise, networking of teachers and principals across schools, cross-role leadership and school improvement teams at school and district levels – all these and many other configurations of professional educators collaborating with one another on student achievement-focused district reform initiatives are indicative of a common emphasis on teamwork and professional community as one of the keys to continuous improvement. As argued by Elmore and Burney (1997), “shared expertise is the driver of instructional change”. Teachers (and others) are more likely to understand and assimilate new professional practices when they learn together and support one another. Effective solutions to challenges for student learning, teacher learning, and organizational change are more likely to emerge through professional collaboration. Collaboration is also key to developing and sustaining goal consensus, shared beliefs, and commitment to reform.

The literature on district reform efforts is relatively silent about the roles and participation of other stakeholder groups in reform planning and implementation. Togneri and Anderson (2003) highlight positive relations and collaboration between school boards and superintendents, and between teacher unions and district officials, in some of the districts they studied, but not all. Several studies mention the pivotal role of business and civic leaders in pressuring and mobilizing the initiation of serious reforms, however, the presence and participation of these external stakeholders tends to be less

well documented during the actual implementation of reform plans over time. The role of parents in district-wide reform is understudied and not well understood.

*New approaches to board-district and in district-school relations.* The role of the school board in school reform gets mixed reviews. Where school board members are factionalized and embroiled in the conflict amongst themselves and with the superintendent, and where school boards have a history of involvement in decision-making about routine administration of the school district (often described as “micro-management”), and where the members are strongly vested in representing particular constituencies in the district, the portrait of the role of the board in reform is negative. Togneri and Anderson (2003) associate more successful districts with school boards that have moved towards a policy governance role that emphasizes policy development, goal and standards setting, strategic planning, and frequent monitoring of system/school progress in relation to district plans, priorities, and accountability systems. Boards functioning in this mode hold the superintendent responsible for routine administration of the system, for implementation of system plans, and for reporting on progress, but avoid direct involvement in managing the school system. They debate issues, but once decisions are taken they speak with a common voice in support of those decisions. Stability in board membership and constructive long-term relations with the district administration are also characteristic of these boards. In two of the districts studied by Togneri and Anderson (2003) the boards sought formal training for their members in policy governance models of operation. School boards are often among the key instigators for reform, and are instrumental in getting reform superintendents into place.

Most analysts of the contemporary role of school districts in education reform comment on the dynamic tension between district-wide goals and focuses for reform and the need for educators at the school-level to assess the particular learning needs of students and teachers in each school, and to plan and organize in ways that fit their specific contexts (Marsh, 2002; Massell & Goertz, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). More successful district-wide reform initiatives, such as the NYC District #2 (Elmore and Burney, 1997), decentralize considerable authority to schools to define student learning needs and to structure the use of professional development resources. The catch is that schools are allowed to do this in ways that do not fragment the coherence of overall reform efforts across the district. Further research is needed to clarify the district policy and strategy dynamics that enable this combination of bottom-up and top-down reform as an ongoing feature of district-supported reform. It is evident, however, that the presence of standards to which all are committed, district mandated focuses for reform (e.g., literacy), school-level accountability mechanisms, and the alignment of access to district resources to the district reform agendas strongly influence, without completely controlling, reform plans and actions of educators at the school level.

*Strategic engagement with state reform policies and resources.* Any notion that school districts simply implement state reform policies and initiatives does not stand up to recent research on the district role in the context of state reforms (Spillane 1996, 1998, 2002; Corcoran, Fuhman, & Belcher (2001). Educators at the district and school levels actively interpret external reform initiatives in light of their own beliefs, preferences, and

experiences, and they mobilize resources to fit local reform agendas. In short, district personnel strategically engage with the external policy and resource environment created by the federal government, state governments, foundations, and professional associations. Not all districts, however, are as committed to doing what it takes for all students to succeed. Successful districts more actively engage with the external policy and resource context in order to leverage those influences to strengthen support for the district reform initiatives, and for the purpose of influencing the external context in favor of the local reform agenda (Furhman & Elmore 1990; Spillane 1996; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

The Impact of District-wide Reforms. The recent case study literature reviewed above provides illuminating narratives, portraits, and analyses of district-wide efforts to improve the quality of student learning and teaching in all classrooms and schools. In qualitative fashion, drawing upon interviews, observations, and local documents, the researchers provide convincing accounts of change at the level of district ethos, goals for improvement, and restructured organizational infra-structures to support reforms. They are convincing, in part, due to the similarity in findings across multiple sites and studies. The empirical linkages between district-level policies and actions and actual changes in teaching and learning practices and outcomes at the classroom level, however, are more logically than empirically demonstrated. The case for impact on student learning outcomes is stronger than the case for impact on instructional activities in the classroom. For the most part, researchers attribute district effects on the basis of temporal correlations between student results on state/district standardized tests and district reform efforts over time. If the test results show significant wide-spread gains in student results associated with the initiation of district reform plans, if these trends are generalized across all or most schools, and if the performance gaps between previous groups of low and high performing students and schools are seen to be diminishing over time, the argument is made that district reform efforts are having a positive impact on student learning. The empirical links between district policies and the actions of district leaders to gains in student learning at the classroom and school levels, however, remains vague. If this is so for student learning outcomes, it is even more so for instructional practice. One of the hallmarks of contemporary district reform initiatives is to emphasize improvement in the quality of teaching, and to focus and invest professional development resources on the implementation of “best practices” in targeted focuses for improvement. Apart from anecdotal and non-systematic observations, teacher self report, and the interview accounts of local officials and consultants whose vested interest is at stake, however, evidence of the extent and scope of teacher change in the classroom is wanting. Togneri and Anderson (2003) found district officials were both challenged and perplexed about how to go about assessing the degree and quality of implementation of teaching and learning strategies associated with district reform efforts on a wide-scale basis.

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