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The Role of Districts in Fostering Instructional Improvement

Lessons from Three Urban Districts
Partnered with the Institute for Learning

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Summary

Improving school systems is critical to bridging the achievement gap between students of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds and to achieving the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). In fall 2002, the RAND Corporation initiated a formative assessment of three urban districts' efforts to improve instructional quality and school performance. The study explored ways to improve teaching and learning in urban school districts. It also examined the contributions of one intermediary organization, the Institute for Learning (IFL), to efforts to introduce systemic change in the three districts. The study sought to answer four broad questions:

- What strategies did districts employ to promote instructional improvement? How did these strategies work?
- What were the constraints and enablers of district instructional improvement efforts?
- What was the impact of the IFL? What were the constraints and enablers of the district-IFL partnerships?
- What are the implications for district instructional improvement and district-intermediary partnerships?

Methods

We used a comparative case study design and mixed methods to answer these questions. Districts were selected for experience working with the IFL (more than three years) and for variation in district size, union environment, and state context. We collected and analyzed data from extensive field interviews and focus groups conducted over a two-year period; from RAND-developed surveys of elementary, middle, and high school principals and teachers; from district and IFL documents; and from demographic and student achievement databases.

Findings

Our evidence yielded the following findings.

District Instructional Improvement Strategies

In the three districts, instructional reform efforts revolved around four common areas of focus: building the instructional leadership skills of principals; supporting the professional learning of teachers, with a particular focus on school-based coaching; providing greater specification of and support for standards-aligned curriculum; and promoting the use of data to guide instructional decisions. While all districts pursued strategies within each area, each tended to focus on two key areas to change the system. In addition, districts had varying degrees of success in attaining the intermediate reform goals (i.e., outcomes expected to ultimately contribute to improved teaching and learning). Our findings in the four areas of reform are as follows.

Instructional Leadership. All districts attempted to increase principals' instructional leadership capacity, giving principals professional development and expecting principals' supervisors (who typically had titles such as area or assistant superintendent) to focus school visits and meetings with principals on matters related to improving instruction.

Despite a relatively consistent focus on instructional leadership, principals varied greatly in the extent to which they acted as instructional leaders. While our data do not definitively explain this variation, several factors enabled district efforts: high-quality professional development and supportive supervisors who helped principals develop instructional leadership skills and implement them daily. Other factors limited this ability: lack of time and lack of credibility—that is, teachers did not view their principals as knowledgeable about instruction.

School-Based Coaching. Two districts invested in school-based instructional coaches as a means of providing ongoing, job-embedded professional development for teachers, but each implemented a different model. Although both models were intended to build the instructional capacity of schools and support district initiatives, *teachers tended to prefer the more flexible, school-centered approach to coaching rather than the relatively standardized curriculum-centered one.* The perceived value and effectiveness of coaches by teachers was greater when (1) coaches tailored their work to school and teacher needs, (2) coaches advised teachers about instruction, (3) time was available to meet with teachers, and (4) roles were clearly defined.

Curriculum Specification. All districts developed and implemented curriculum guidance documents that were intended to improve alignment of instruction with state standards and assessments and to increase consistency of instruction across classrooms and schools by specifying districtwide guidelines for the scope, pacing, and content of curriculum. Two districts invested significant resources into developing and monitoring teachers' use of the documents.

While district and school staff generally viewed the curriculum guides as useful for planning, promoting consistency of instruction, and helping principals observe and monitor teachers, teachers reported a limited effect on pedagogy. That is, teachers reported that guides influenced “when” and “what” they taught, but they did not make major shifts in “how” they taught the curriculum. Teachers were apt to value and use the guides when they perceived them to be aligned with state tests, received them in a timely manner, and participated in the

development process. However, many teachers in all districts described the pacing and content of the guides as conflicting with their need to tailor instruction to individual students.

Data Use. The study districts invested to varying degrees in multiple strategies promoting the use of data to guide instructional decisions, such as providing professional development on how to interpret test results and encouraging structured reviews of student work. However, two districts focused much more on use of data. One emphasized the school improvement planning (SIP) process. The second district focused on interim assessments, designed to provide an “early warning system on progress being made” toward meeting state standards.

Teachers and principals in both districts generally found the various sources of data useful and reported using them regularly to identify areas of weakness and to guide instructional decisions. Principals and teachers in the district that focused on the SIP process, however, described the process as overly labor-intensive. Furthermore, teachers in the district that focused on interim assessments were less enthusiastic about these assessments than principals, preferring more timely, regular classroom assessment data. The efforts of both districts to focus on data were enabled by long-standing state accountability systems, accessibility and timeliness of data, teachers’ views of the assessment results as valid measures of students’ knowledge and ability, and the degree to which school staff received training and support for analyzing and interpreting data.

Constraints and Enablers of Instructional Improvement

Once district leaders had designed their reform strategies and put them into place, a number of common factors affected districts’ success in bringing about the intermediate outcomes they intended for each set of strategies. Taken as a whole, these factors led to several cross-cutting findings:

- **Although it was important for districts to implement comprehensive reform, they benefited from focusing on a small number of initiatives.** While seemingly counter-intuitive, the com-

bination of comprehensiveness—a systemic approach, strategies addressing all dimensions of instruction, and a dual focus on infrastructure and direct support—and focus on two key areas of reform proved to be important for instructional reform in all three districts.

- **District and school capacity greatly affected reform efforts.** While focusing on a few priority initiatives may have helped conserve limited resources to some extent, all districts nonetheless faced significant capacity gaps that hindered instructional improvement. According to district and school staff across the sites, capacity gaps that were most detrimental were *insufficient time* (e.g., for planning, to act as instructional leaders), *lack and/or instability of fiscal or physical resources* (e.g., instructional materials, funding), and *limited capacity of central office staff* (e.g., inadequate numbers, lack of expertise).
- **The broader policy context created both enabling and constraining conditions for district reform.** For example, some union policies hindered reform in two districts, and state and federal accountability policies shaped much of the districts' work with curriculum and data use.
- **Districts' success also was tied to several key dimensions and characteristics of the policies they developed.** District progress at achieving intermediate instructional improvement goals hinged in large part on the degree to which strategies
 - were aligned and mutually supportive
 - enabled multiple stakeholders to engage in reform
 - balanced standardization and flexibility
 - used local accountability policies to provide incentives for meaningful change.

Overall, districts generally struggled to achieve these policy features, which might be better characterized as common challenges or tensions that districts faced in achieving systemwide change.

Effect of IFL on District Instructional Reform

Partnerships with the IFL contributed to district reform in all three districts. In exchange for a fee, the IFL provided districts with a variety of resources, including on-site technical assistance from IFL resident fellows, opportunities to attend national meetings with other partner districts, advice from IFL leaders, and access to research, materials, and other tools. The IFL did not present an intervention or model for districts to implement as such but instead acted as a “coach,” assisting districts with various aspects of instructional improvement appropriate to each local context.

In examining the IFL role in supporting district work in the four areas of instructional reform, we found that the strongest reported contributions of IFL were to systemwide efforts to build the instructional leadership of administrators. At all three sites, the IFL influenced the design and implementation of professional development opportunities for principals and central office staff, frequently delivering monthly training sessions and providing supporting materials that elucidated what it meant to be an instructional leader. According to district and IFL leaders, the IFL’s contribution to other areas of reform—data use, coaching, and curriculum specification—was not as strong or as consistent across sites.

Overall, two findings emerged from our analysis of the IFL contributions to district reform.

1. **District and school leaders reported that the IFL affected the organizational culture, norms, and beliefs about instruction.** District leaders reported shifts in beliefs and norms around a set of ideas emphasized in IFL materials, professional development, and technical assistance. These included effort-based intelligence, two-way accountability, a focus on instruction and learning, the idea that everyone is a learner, and instruction as a public endeavor.
2. **The IFL was credited with helping develop the knowledge and skills of central office and school administrators.** The majority of principals in all three districts reported that professional development opportunities organized by the IFL and the districts improved their skills as instructional leaders, deepened their

knowledge about learning, and provided them with a common language facilitating dialogue. Similarly, central office leaders and staff reported that IFL staff pushed them to focus on instruction and system-level structures and policies that enabled high-quality instruction. They also reported that the IFL helped them become more knowledgeable about instruction and more skilled at supervising and supporting principals.

Both of these reported effects address key challenges facing districts undertaking systemic reform—namely, a lack of alignment among district initiatives and limited capacity to undertake reform. By providing a common set of ideas concerning teaching and learning, the IFL may have helped districts build mutually supportive reform strategies around a common vision of high-quality instruction. By enhancing principals' and central office administrators' knowledge and skills, the IFL also may have helped build the overall capacity of the district to lead instructional change across a system of schools.

Finally, several common factors appeared to influence IFL partnerships with the districts and its impact on them. The effect of the IFL was particularly strong when

- district and school leaders (e.g., superintendent, mid-level managers, principals) bought into the IFL's work
- IFL staff were viewed as trustworthy, credible, and having expertise that matched a particular district need
- the IFL offered practical tools to support implementation of theoretical ideas.

In some cases, however, the IFL's influence was constrained by

- the perception of IFL as a vendor brought in to provide particular services without much coordination and support from district leaders
- the IFL's limited capacity to support districts in all areas of reform
- turnover within the districts and the IFL.

Lessons Learned

The experiences of these three urban districts and their partnerships with the IFL provide evidence of promising results from systemwide instructional improvement efforts, yet they also raise warnings for districts and intermediary organizations about several important challenges they might face when attempting similar reforms. Our case studies also show that an intermediary organization can help districts address persistent constraints on reform by building the capacity of district staff to engage in instructional change and by facilitating policy alignment.

Lessons for Instructional Improvement

Based on the reform experiences of the three study districts, we offer the following lessons learned:

- Investing in the professional development of central office staff can enhance capacity to lead instructional reform.
- Instituting local accountability policies that create incentives for meaningful change can promote implementation.
- Aligning and developing a comprehensive set of strategies can reinforce overarching instructional improvement goals.

Lessons for District-Intermediary Partnerships

Although the specific characteristics of the IFL set it apart from some other types of third-party organizations, its experiences in these three districts nevertheless offer potentially useful insights for similar organizations as well as for districts considering similar partnerships. We present the following observations:

- Buy-in and support from top-level leaders can affect partnership viability.
- Preexisting reform initiatives and partnerships are important to consider when forming new partnerships.

- The capacity of the intermediary organization and its alignment with district needs can greatly affect partnership success.
- Practical tools that are perceived to be relevant and legitimate to the district's local context are needed.
- Multiple types of "scale-up" strategies can be relevant to system-wide change efforts.
- Defining and measuring partnership goals and progress may facilitate improvements and help sustain partnerships over time.

In the end, the experiences of these three urban districts and their partnerships with the IFL provide encouraging results regarding the role that districts and intermediary organizations can play in improving instruction, and valuable lessons about factors that constrain and enable the implementation and impact of such efforts.