

Introduction — Why and How Do Districts Need to Change in this Current Accountability Context?

from **Central Office Inquiry: Assessing Organization, Roles, and Functions to Support School Improvement**

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Introduction

Why and how do districts need to change in this current accountability context?

Achieving success for all students requires a consistent, systemic approach across the district, with all players working in sync. Such consistency begins with the superintendent and other key central office staff¹ embracing and acting on a coherent theory of action about how schools improve. This theory of action (i.e., a system of beliefs that guides behaviors) must address both the process of school change and, equally important, the role of the central office in that process. In doing so, this shared theory sets the course not just for individual schools, but also for the district as a whole.

Unfortunately, rather than functioning as well-organized, goal-driven systems, too many districts are characterized by a lack of unified direction, a lack of agreement about the central office role in supporting school improvement, and a lack of alignment between goals and strategies. This disjointed arrangement can lead to competing goals, programs, and initiatives; struggles over resources; and a depletion of energy. A central office lacking a systemic, coherent approach cannot give schools the help they need to improve student learning. Instead, it pulls schools in competing directions, leaving them feeling isolated and adrift.

In districts taking a more cohesive approach to districtwide improvement, central office staff have a shared understanding of what it takes to bring about real school improvement, including what roles they must play individually and collectively and what structures must be in place to support that change. This shared understanding informs all decisions and drives central office staff to actively assist schools in implementing the identified structures.

The purpose of this book is to help you undertake a central office inquiry, in which key staff reflect on their shared theory of action and examine their current organizational arrangement, their enacted roles, and their day-to-day activities, critically questioning whether and how their actions and structures are concretely helping the schools they serve. Our work here is based on several deeply held beliefs: We believe most central office staff are dedicated, intelligent people who took on their demanding jobs because of a deep commitment to students and education. We believe that current federal and state policies, coupled with a challenging local context, can often overwhelm the good intentions of those in leadership positions. And, finally, we believe that there are many possible routes to improvement, and the right one for any given district depends on the context — which is best understood by those within it.

¹ By key central office staff we mean, minimally, decision-makers and other staff members working in areas related to school performance (e.g., curriculum and instruction, assessment, professional development, leadership development). In smaller districts, it may be appropriate and helpful to have all central office staff involved in the activities presented in this book.

Albert Einstein observed that “problems cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them.” Our intent here is to provide a structured reflection process that helps central office staff gain perspective on their work and how it does or does not support school improvement. The Try It Out activities found in chapters 1, 2, and 3 are designed to have participants hit the pause button, step away from their busy daily work lives, and, together, undertake a more objective examination of the system in which they work. One way that an effective external assistance provider helps a district is by providing a mirror on how the district operates, helping staff gain valuable perspective. The process we offer in this book is designed to help you gain that same internal objectivity without needing to rely on outside help. Undertaking this reflective process requires fearlessness, calm, and resolve. It also is likely to involve some pain, because critical self-examination inevitably identifies shortcomings. Because humans create their own perspectives based on past experience and their perception of the present, rarely do you find a group of people who all feel the same way about something. Thus, an additional source of discomfort may be hearing what others think and feel about your role and actions as a member of the central office staff. Remember, though, that such conversations are imperative in any effort to build an organization based on trust and open communication.

The information presented in this book is based on an intensive three-year study of three school districts working to support continuous school improvement. The study sought to gain a clearer, deeper understanding of the role the central office plays in districtwide school improvement. We investigated the role of the superintendent and the improvement structures the central office employed to support school change. We then went to schools asking principals and teachers about their understanding and implementation of the improvement structures. (For examples of such structures, see p. 8.)

Our research team collected both qualitative (interview and observation) and quantitative (survey and student achievement) data. All interviews and observations were transcribed and analyzed to look for patterns at the district level. Two surveys – the Principal Survey and Gibson and Dembo’s Teacher Efficacy Survey (1984) – were used to collect data from all principals in the study districts and all teachers in the study schools.

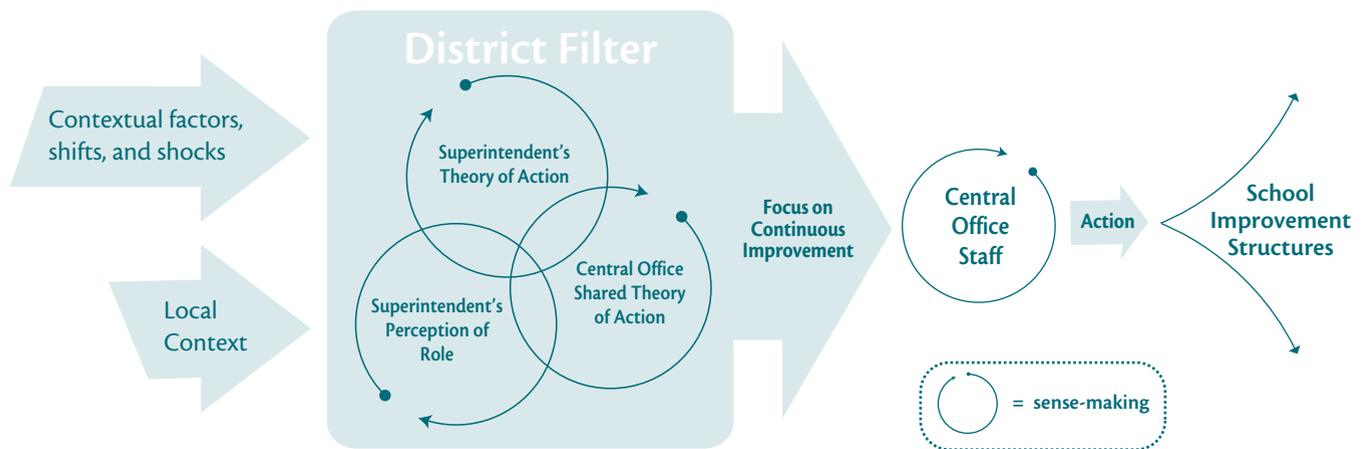
A descriptive conceptual framework, built from organizational theory, evolved through our study of the central office data. The framework consists of three essential parts:

- the *filter* that central office staff use to perceive events and information;
- the *sense-making* process within which central office staff select particular aspects of the environment on which to focus in building a shared theory of action and in joining efforts around specific goals; and
- the *contextual factors* that impact how a district operates.

The term “filter” is used as something akin to a photographic filter for a camera lens. In this sense, the district filter serves to direct the intensity of focus, giving more light and contrast to some things and less to others. The filter also slows down or partially obstructs the flow of information and events into the realm of district action. The district filter, then, casts more light on and brings into closer view what is of importance to the district while shading out information and issues of less importance. How organizations filter information depends on their focus, current projects, interests, prior knowledge, and available time. Weick notes that it is “productive to look at the filters people invoke, why they invoke them and what those filters include and exclude” (1995, p. 57). Within our framework, the district filter consists of three interrelated parts: the superintendent’s perception of his or her role; the superintendent’s theory of action; and the central office shared theory of action. Ideally, these elements interact to generate a shared focus on continuous improvement. (See Conceptual Framework below.)

Our analysis of the central office data from our study revealed how the superintendent’s perception of role, focus of attention, and theory of action are intertwined. We saw how different definitions of roles engender different beliefs about how best to improve schools and lead to different decisions about how to focus time and energy. It is important to note that we believe a superintendent’s perception of his or her role is fluid and influenced by environmental and ecological factors. For example, the looming threat of large budget cuts might cause a superintendent to deliberately alter his or her role to focus outward with the intent of influencing legislative decisions.

Conceptual Framework



Another finding points to the relationship between the central office’s shared theory of action and the creation and implementation of school improvement structures, such as new strategies, staff positions, or programs. We found that the theory of action and the related structures are interdependent: Structures without theory lead to fragmentation, and theory without structures remains just that – theory. More specifically, greater district-wide implementation appeared to result when the central office adhered to an explicit, shared theory of action.

In all three research districts we found central office staff acting as agents of change in an effort to improve student achievement. Each central office battles the forces of inertia within its district and state by working to change policy, positions, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and norms of interaction. It was evident that these battles consumed individual attention and energy and pulled staff away from acting on their own beliefs about school improvement.

Communication emerges as either the best friend or the worst enemy of efforts to develop and implement coordinated, focused structures for school improvement. Ongoing dialogue and “sense-making” creates and recreates staff focus, allowing it to be consistent yet dynamically responsive to changes in the environment. On the other hand, poor communication leads to individual sense-making that over time veers in diverse directions and begins to fray the edges of the focus, ultimately leading to its dissolution.

In Chapter 1, we begin this inquiry with a Try It Out activity that helps you take stock of what your district is already doing to support continuous school improvement. Each Try It Out symbol includes the page number for a specific activity related to the concepts presented in the chapter. The activities build on one another and, at times, require information generated in a previous activity. Each activity concludes with a list of questions for reflection. (We recognize that most readers will want to peruse the book in its entirety before completing individual activities, but it is important to understand the relationship of the placement of the Try It Out symbols to the inquiry process presented in the book.) This first activity engages central office staff in examining their theory of action and the structures currently in place to help schools improve. In Chapter 2, we then examine the contextual factors affecting districts, including their impact on roles and functions of central office staff. Among these factors are the historical role of the central office and the impact of the local context, federal and state policy, the governing board, and local and national organizations. Finally, in Chapter 3, we address development of a cohesive central office theory of action with aligned roles, functions, and structures. In Chapters 1 and 3 you’ll find some key findings from our study highlighted in the margin. Because the districts in our study have asked to remain anonymous, we identify their superintendents by pseudonyms: Superintendent Harry, Superintendent Linda, and Superintendent William.