District Support for School Improvement

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Successful districtwide programs can provide a number of benefits for struggling schools.

The accountability requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act put responsibility for student achievement squarely on schools. However, district policies and programs provide a framework that can help or hinder a school’s efforts to provide a high-quality learning environment for its students. There have been several research studies during the past decade that have focused on how districts impact school improvement efforts.
mandated targets for student performance. District school populations were predominantly comprised of students from low socioeconomic households, with high percentages of minorities and significant numbers of English-language learners.

The studies typically took a case-study approach in which researchers examined trends in assessment results, reviewed changes in district initiatives and programs, and—most important—talked to teachers and principals as well as central office staff members.

Improvement was measured in terms of district progress in the number of students reaching standards on state assessments. Although many of the districts experienced significant improvements over periods of only a few years, they continued to face challenges, particularly as achievement bars were raised and the proportion of students with at-risk characteristics increased.

Identifying Common Themes
The findings of studies of district-supported improvement efforts identified several key themes that might also apply to school improvement efforts.

First, there was a clearly defined roadmap for district efforts. The most successful improvement efforts were systemic as leaders looked at how the “pieces” of district structures and programs fit together and took a comprehensive “big picture” view. While roadmaps involved multiple efforts, the intent was for the elements to be mutually reinforcing whenever possible. The most successful districts limited improvement initiatives to a few fundamental efforts, even though this sometimes required eliminating or taking resources away from popular programs.

Another theme was a dual focus on excellence and equity. While district leaders recognized the requirement that more students meet standards, they also stressed the need for raising the bar over the long term. Finally, the leaders sent a clear and unwavering message: Low expectations for any group of students were unacceptable.

How the Successful Districts Improved
Although it is often difficult to summarize the findings of several studies that use a variety of approaches to examine and discuss a similar research question, this was not true in this instance. Instead, the approaches found across studies were strikingly similar and combine to provide a valuable picture of how these districts improved.

Increasing emphasis on curriculum and instruction. Gordon (2002), in discussing Chicago school reform efforts, describes this as “moving instruction to center stage.” Teachers, often supported by central office staff, met to engage in planning for curriculum alignment, develop pacing guides, and talk about grade-to-grade articulation. In addition, many of the districts developed benchmark assessments that were used to identify problems with student mastery of content and skills. The emphasis was on ensuring that problems were identified and addressed quickly.

Reorganizing resources to support improvement efforts. Although adequate funding was an issue in many of the districts, all of them shifted resources to support improvement efforts. For example, at the district level additional funding might be provided for schools to support after-school classes for students who needed special assistance. At the school level, resource reorganization might include shifting teaching assignments and class loads in order to fund a master teacher position.

Assigning accountability to the schools. A key aspect of the district improvement efforts was the clear signal from the superintendent, school board, and central office staff that principals and their teachers were to be held accountable for student learning. There would be no excuses. In some of the districts profiled, the decision to shift more accountability resulted in tensions. For example, site-based accountability often did not mean that schools were free to select their own curricula. On the contrary, the recognition that improved performance on state assessments
required a tighter link between what was assessed and what was taught often resulted in a districtwide curriculum for the tested subjects. Although schools recognized the need to prepare their students for testing, some felt that they had lost the ability to make important curricular choices.

Making effective use of data. This was both a goal and a way of life in many of the districts studied. It typically required the development of more efficient ways to access and display data, a sometimes costly and time-consuming enterprise. Additionally, staff at all levels needed to be trained in the use of data.

Increasing staff communication and collaboration. As districts recognized the need to better align the curriculum with state assessments, many of them scheduled time for teachers to collaborate in this effort. Teachers reported that these discussions often resulted in a better understanding of grade-by-grade expectations for students. At the building level, many principals developed schedules that made it possible for teachers to collaborate routinely. This not only got necessary work completed, it also changed the culture of many of the schools and districts. Teachers felt they were being better supported in their work as professionals and were part of the larger district picture.

Using professional development to support improvement efforts. Although their schools had resources to provide professional development opportunities aligned with their specific needs, districts might, for example, provide additional training to all elementary teachers and principals on the teaching of reading. Both schools and districts also increased their use of less traditional approaches to professional development. For example, both districts and schools used successful teachers to assist other teachers by providing demonstration lessons, and by leading subject-area or grade-level improvement efforts.

Intervening in schools making little progress. This intervention might involve more control and supervision, but could also result in the allocation of additional resources being channeled to the school.

Assisting students with academic difficulties. Although the districts and their schools had always attempted to address the needs of struggling students, the help provided often could be characterized as too little and too late. This approach changed with the realization that timely, on-target support was needed long before students fell so far behind that they might never catch up. For example, many districts supported development of benchmark assessments that provided ongoing data on the progress of individual students. Principals and teachers were expected to use this data to identify difficulties and to provide prompt assistance.

Shifting the role of central office staff. By moving from control and supervision to providing increased support and consultation for school-based efforts, the central office took on a new role. This often included developing a process to identify best practices already in use in a district’s schools and classrooms—then providing the resources and training needed to replicate the practice in other sites.

Looking at the Flip Side

So far, the focus has been on the positive lessons learned from research about district-supported school improvement efforts. But every principal knows that change is hard work, and the profiled districts all experienced what Cawelti and Protheroe (2001) characterize as the “flip side” of change efforts. These include:

- Frustration of school staff when asked to abandon or substantially de-emphasize programs they considered beneficial for their students;
- Lack of integration/cohesion among programs;
- Unwillingness of some staff to fully support changes, with attitudes ranging from indifference to hostility; and
- Difficulty in finding time for non-tested subjects, such as social studies or art.

Another problem was that although the districts worked to provide development opportunities for both central office and school staff, this was typically done after initiatives had already begun. Thus, there often was a period characterized by false starts and excess effort needed to make progress toward short-term goals.

A more structured, top-down approach to establishing what was to be taught, and when, often generated frustration and resistance among school staff members, especially for districts that had previously used a system of site-based management. Schools also expressed concern that the increased standardization made it more difficult for them to address the unique needs of their students.

Finally, while school and district staff members interviewed by researchers talked often about the satisfaction they experienced when student achievement improved, they did not minimize the hard work involved. To help them keep going, the most effective district and school leaders made recognition of staff efforts an integral part of improvement efforts.

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References


Reading Recovery: Powerful, Proven Results

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http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/reports/beginning_reading/

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• Reading Recovery delivers measurable results in weeks, not years.

• Reading Recovery can support your school’s response to intervention (RTI) and early intervening services (EIS) in accordance with IDEA regulations.