Coherent, Instructionally-Focused District Leadership:
Toward A Theoretical Account

The Education Policy Center at Michigan State University
Coherent, Instructionally-Focused District Leadership: Toward A Theoretical Account

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For at least two decades, educational reformers and the policy research community have generally regarded local school districts either as irrelevant or as outright impediments to the improvement of student learning outcomes. Accumulating case study evidence, however, suggests that, in some school districts, leadership and policy may contribute significantly to the improvement and equalization of student learning outcomes. The existence of such cases implies that districts can play an important role in improving outcomes if the mechanisms of district success were better understood and more widely implemented. This article offers an account of what existing research suggests about effective district leadership and indicates directions for future research. In brief, higher and more equitable student performance may be achieved district-wide through the exercise of coherent, instructionally-focused leadership. This leadership harmonizes a variety of administrative controls, capacity building measures, and resource concentration processes with the enhancement of professional community to bring about a pervasive unity of purpose and the capacity to pursue it effectively. Perhaps surprisingly, effective district leaders appear to use formal organizational structures and instruments to strengthen and sustain professional community. In turn, professional community seems to help mobilize will, capacity, and resources in the service of district goals.

Keywords: district leadership, instructional leadership, accountability, professional community, equitable outcomes
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. **INTRODUCTION** .............................................1

II. **COHERENCE AND EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES** ...............3

III. **THE POLITICAL SYSTEM** .................................9

IV. **THE ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM** .........................16

V. **THE PROFESSIONAL SYSTEM** .............................30

VI. **CONCLUSION** ................................................36

# APPENDICES

**APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY** ............................48

**APPENDIX B: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ..................49
INTRODUCTION

For at least two decades, educational reformers and the policy research community have generally regarded local school districts either as irrelevant or as outright impediments to the improvement of student learning outcomes (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Elmore, 1993; Smith & O’Day, 1990). This view has enjoyed some empirical support. For example, in the late 1980s, Floden and his colleagues found that, while districts displayed a “vague intention” to influence teachers’ decisions about what and how to teach, they pursued no approach to instructional leadership in a concerted way (Floden et al., 1988). Some reformers have sought to bypass school systems through strategies linking state policy to individual schools or linking individual schools into “systems of schools.” Others have proposed eliminating districts altogether, along with the entire apparatus of direct democratic control of schooling (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

One study of a group of school districts in California did identify a set of conditions and plausible success factors (Murphy & Hallinger, 1988), but evidence on success was sketchy. Today, however, a more robust case literature has emerged to suggest that coherent, instructionally-focused district leadership can improve overall student outcomes and reduce ethnic and socioeconomic gaps in performance (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2005; Elmore & Burney, 1998a, 1998b, 1999; Hernandez, 2003; McKenzie Group, 1999; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Snipes, et al., 2002; O’Day, 2002; Rorrer, 2002; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000; Supovitz, 2006; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Although cases of effective district leadership remain the exceptions that prove the rule, the affirmative cases are now numerous enough to warrant serious attention to districts’ potential. Taken together, the cases and related analyses not only suggest that districts can contribute to the improvement and equalization of student outcomes, but also show how some of them appear to do so. Indeed, one can even discern from the cases intimations of a theoretical account plausibly connecting district leadership with improved outcomes (Hightower, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; O’Day, 2002; Supovitz, 2006).

This article draws upon the case literature, related research, and organizational theory to examine the role that all school districts can and some school districts do play in improving and equalizing student outcomes—not instead of, but in the context of state accountability systems and associated elements of systemic school reform. In many of the cases cited, the evidence that the leadership and policy activity described in the cases is actually improving student outcomes is modest. Even combined across all cases, the evidence is suggestive rather than summarily convincing. The claim set forth here is correspondingly modest—not that the dynamics described lead predictably to higher and more equitable...
Coherent, Instructionally-Focused District Leadership

outcomes, but that variations on coherent, instructionally-focused district leadership show promise of doing so. This account calls attention to important unanswered questions as well as to emergent patterns in the literature.
Over the past several years, the importance of coherence in educational policy and practice has been touted frequently and observed occasionally at all levels of the education system. For example, Smith and O’Day (1990) pointed out that coherence had emerged around a basic skills curriculum in the 1980s, prompting a rise in achievement by poor and minority students. They called on states to raise and equalize achievement further by establishing higher standards, then aligning a broad range of policies to support achievement of those standards. In a volume edited by Fuhrman (1993), several prominent students of policy explored the effects and potential of coherence across levels and along various dimensions of the education system. Later, Newmann and others (2001) demonstrated that coherence at the school level promotes gains in student outcomes. Garet, Porter, and their colleagues (2001) found that coherence in professional development activities fosters desirable changes in classroom practice in mathematics and science, a finding recently confirmed and enlarged by Firestone and colleagues (Firestone et al., 2005). Recent work by the Public Education and Leadership Project (PELP) at Harvard University prominently features coherence as a leading aspect of its framework for high performance districts (Childress et al., 2007).

Different analysts have defined coherence in different ways and have examined different aspects of the educational system. Still, their arguments have shared the underlying premise that enabling a diverse array of students to learn to high standards requires a sharp focus on a well-defined, delimited set of instructional goals, delivered by teachers with knowledge and skills keyed specifically to those goals, supported by curricular materials, assessments, and financial resources concentrated accordingly, with articulation across classrooms and grade levels and continuity over time. Diffuse or proliferating goals, “Christmas tree” arrays of programs and approaches, and inconstancy over time are seen as the enemies of the requisite focus and continuity (Bryk et al., 1998).

Recent case literature and related research suggest that classroom and school level coherence can be promoted by coherence in district level leadership—leadership spurred or supported by political pressures and implemented by harmonizing a variety of administrative controls with the creation of a professional community to bring about a pervasive unity of purpose. Effective district leaders appear to use formal organizational instruments to structure incentives and build capacity both directly and—more surprisingly—by strengthening professional community. Reciprocally, professional community seems to help mobilize will, capacity, and resources in the service of district goals. The notion that,
A first set of challenges concern the difficulty of establishing the improvement of instruction and instructional outcomes as a dominant goal.

Under certain circumstances, tightened administrative controls are not only compatible with strong professional community but can actually help strengthen it offers an especially intriguing puzzle for reflection and future research.

The Challenge to Coherence in District Leadership

To understand how leadership works in unusually effective districts, it is useful to understand the challenges that such leadership seems to overcome. A first set of challenges concerns the difficulty of establishing the improvement of instruction and instructional outcomes as a dominant goal. At all levels of America’s system of governance in education, a multitude of actors with diverging agendas compete to set goals for the system and give their own goals top priority. School districts are subject not only to conflicting pressures from parents, advocacy groups, employers, and unions within the local community, but are also heir to the thicket of laws, regulations, and programs engendered by similar forces at the federal and state levels (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Cohen & Spillane, 1992). This fragmented environment generally diffuses attention, effort, and resources across many goals, none pursued in a concerted way (Floden et al., 1988; Hess, 1999).

Historical scholarship has portrayed school superintendents as structurally vulnerable in the sense that both their jobs and the school budget are perpetually dependent on maintaining community assent. As Callahan (1962) argued, “as long as vulnerable schoolmen have a knife poised at their financial jugular vein each year, professional autonomy is impossible” (p. ix). The result is a built-in bias toward conformity and modest change. Writing about superintendents’ efforts at reform, Iannaccone (1996) reports, “I saw them as professional efforts to produce a sort of career invulnerability that was also preventing the schools from engaging in serious social change at the same time as they engaged in repeated window dressing reforms” (p. 114). He concludes, “It seemed to me that adaptation to reform efforts had produced a system that adjusted to public demand superficially but left fundamental operation unchanged” (p. 115). Such testimony points to political barriers to reform that rise directly out of local, democratic school governance (see also Lutz and Iannaccone, 1974).

Further complicating the challenge are forces of fragmentation within the district itself. Individual teachers, administrators, and other personnel tend to behave as individual agents, each driven by some combination of self-interests and personal preferences about educational goals and means (O’Day, 2002; Weick & McDaniel, 1988). Structural segmentation (“egg crate schools,” administrative units forming “silos”) and organizational codes supporting teacher autonomy favor the triumph of individual and subunit preferences over organizational goals and coordination (Little, 1990; Lortie, 1975).
Toward a Theoretical Account

In addition to goal diffusion, political vulnerability, and fragmentation, uncertainty about means has plagued education. The field is said to have an uncertain “technology”—to lack a well-defined set of techniques, materials, and equipment demonstrated to produce results reliably in varied settings over time. Instead, effective practice is “highly contingent.” It demands ongoing interpretation, judgment, and adjustment to the requirements of the setting, student, and moment (Cobb, McLay, Lamberg, & Dean, 2003; Cohen & Ball, 1999; Meyer & Rowan, 1978; O’Day, 2002; Rowan, 1990; Rowan & Miskel, 1999; Weick & McDaniel, 1988; Wenger, 1998).

As a consequence of the diffusion of goals, vulnerability to shifting public pressures, and uncertainty about means, district administrators have seldom asserted strong control via supervision, incentives, or sanctions. Districts and schools are characterized as “loosely coupled” systems (Bidwell, 1965; Weick, 1976; Weick & McDaniel, 1988). For decades, districts and schools sustained public support and organizational order by conforming to widely held images of the inputs, programs, and routines characteristic of “good schools” and to law and rule—“institutional” mechanisms of adaptation—rather than through the output-maximizing instrumental rationality observed by economists in private sector organizations (Meyer & Rowan, 1978; Rowan & Miskel, 1999; Scott, 1995). The 1980s and early 1990s saw widespread efforts to assert stronger administrative control, but the efforts produced mixed success and were often criticized as compliance-oriented and more appropriate to readily routine tasks than to the complexity and contingency of educational practice (Rowan, 1990). Many reformers argued instead for strengthening professional controls via improved initial preparation and socialization into the profession along with the cultivation of professional communities with norms that shape instructional practice effectively without tight administrative supervision (Holmes Group, 1986; Little, 1990; Rowan, 1990; Weick & McDaniel, 1988). Despite attempted reforms of both types, few districts developed strong administrative or professional controls, and the personal value preferences of individual teachers and administrators continue to dominate organizational goals or professional values and norms (Floden et al., 1988; Skrla et al., 2000; Weick & McDaniel, 1988).

In addition to the challenges of establishing common goals and identifying a reliable technology of instruction to pursue them, districts have also faced the challenge of developing the capacity to pursue goals effectively. The most commonly emphasized type of capacity is “human capital” in the form of knowledgeable and skilled teachers and administrators. Some have argued that the expertise of teachers and administrators is generally inadequate to the challenges of complex, contingent practice because pre-service preparation for both teachers and administrators is commonly mediocre; induction, perfunctory; professional development, scattered and shallow; and professional community of practice, rare (Smith & O’Day, 1990). Instructional repertoires are largely constructed by teachers working individually, guided by images of teaching and learning derived from long experience as a student (Lortie, 1975), and such experience is itself shaped by deeply-embedded ideas about teaching and learning (Cohen,
Coherent, Instructionally-Focused District Leadership

...most school districts offer few productive supports for instruction of either an administrative or a professional sort.

Thus, it is scarcely surprising that Floden and his colleagues found that most school districts offer few productive supports for instruction of either an administrative or a professional sort (Floden et al., 1988). District leaders seeking to establish district-wide focus on instructional goals and to orchestrate coordinated action toward them have an exquisitely difficult problem to solve, beset from without by many local actors with conflicting agendas as well as by the mesh of law and rule generated by similar actors at higher levels of the system, and confronted within the district by a multitude of independent agents with varied goals and preferred strategies, constrained by organizational codes that reinforce agent autonomy, bureaucratic balkanization, and deep-seated institutional patterns. It is understandable, then, that Cuban (1988) found most superintendents concentrating on political and managerial rather than instructional functions.

The Achievement of Coherence in District Leadership

Some districts seem to “beat the odds,” achieve coherence, and produce higher and more equitable outcomes, at least across many schools if not in all subjects or at all grade levels. Theirs may be a limited achievement, but against the backdrop of the challenge to district leadership it is a significant one. To help explain how they attain it, this paper offers a theoretical account to interpret existing research and frame further research. It is too early to draw firm conclusions about how successful districts succeed, but it is not too early to puzzle out the meaning of the literature to date as a heuristic to guide further inquiry.

Districts, it can be argued, are composed of three distinct but interdependent social systems interacting within a context:

- a political system, comprising the school board, the superintendent as a political leader, and the main constituencies that shape the goals, priorities, and strategies they choose;
- an administrative system, comprising structures and functions through which the district as a formal organization operates, including (1) executive, (2) instructional guidance, (3) human resource development, and (4) support operations functions; and
- a professional system, comprising the communities and networks of teachers, principals, and specialists who populate the district, each governed by professional norms and values related to their spheres of practice.
Toward a Theoretical Account

Across districts, these systems vary in strength and cohesiveness — indeed, in the degree to which each actually represents an integrated social system, rather than a loose array of elements.

In effective districts, factors in the state and local context converge to prompt the local political system to establish a singular, unifying focus on high and equitable student outcomes. This unified political environment encourages top administrators to fashion coherence in the otherwise separate and even discordant policies and administrative units that make up the district. If judiciously managed, this administrative environment does not choke off but actually enables the emergence of a strong professional system. The cultures and operations of schools are in turn shaped by both the administrative and professional systems of their districts. Schools obviously have their own internal dynamics, but an environment of strong, unified administrative systems shapes these dynamics, focusing them on district goals, promoting the specific capacities required to pursue the goals, and aligning the use of resources to support coordinated use of the capacities. Thus, the school district is an embedded set of political, administrative, and professional environments.

The balance of this account elaborates this proposition in more detail, illustrating the argument with material from selected district case studies. The argument is organized into sections on how each of the three environments can shape the conditions essential to improved and more equitable student performance: shared motivating goals, aligned capacity, and concentrated resources. Each system is elaborated in its corresponding section, but we begin by sketching here our conceptions of the three essential conditions.

The first essential condition is motivation, which has the dimensions of direction, intensity, and duration. The motivational challenge facing top district leaders is not simply to stimulate higher levels of effort (increased intensity), but to focus central office administrators, principals, teachers, and other agents with varying individual motives on a unified set of organizational goals and to concert action without damping individual drive (common direction). Furthermore, to be effective, action by these distributed agents must be goal-driven (Von Bertalanffy, 1976) rather than mechanically compliant, for three reasons. First, simple routines do not reliably produce learning by different students in different contexts and on different occasions. Second, it is difficult to know what causes successes and failures in teaching and learning. Finally, persistence through multiple attempts at interpretation and correction of failures in teaching and learning is required to produce equitable outcomes (O’Day, 2002; Weick & McDaniel, 1988).

An organization’s productive capacity is often conceived primarily in terms of the knowledge and skills of its workforce—its “human capital.” As Spillane and Thompson (1997) showed, however, a school district’s capacity is usefully construed to include its social capital, as well—the professional networks and communities that interconnect members of the organization along lines distinct from the formal hierarchical structure. In...
Kadushin’s (2002) fine phrase, professional networks are “draped across” formal organizational structures; professional communities sometimes nest within organizational units such as schools or departments and sometimes reach across them as in a community of mathematics educators. The notion of capacity can be extended still further to include the organizational structures and the curricular, instructional, assessment, and accountability tools that the administrative system employs in pursuit of district goals—its “administrative capital.” In this account, then, a district’s productive capacity includes human capital, social capital, and administrative capital.

The third enabling condition for improved district-wide instructional effectiveness is a concentrated use of financial resources. Resource use is the transformation of fungible financial resources into human capital, social capital, and administrative capital. Examination of contemporary debates concerning the complex, obscure relationship of financial resources to student outcomes is beyond the scope of this article (for a summary, see Ladd and Hansen, 1999). We simply propose that more effective districts concentrate financial resources on the achievement of high and equitable learning outcomes.

This account turns next to how the three social systems shape motivation, capacity, and resource allocation, leading to different levels of instructional effectiveness.
As noted earlier, in many districts efforts to establish focused goals and a coherent strategy to pursue them is forestalled by some combination of contending external constituencies and internal bureaucratic self-interests. In others, reform efforts are initiated but soon aborted by the same forces (Hess, 1999). The spectacle of stalemate or fitful reform has led some to advocate the abolition of political control of schooling in favor of market-based arrangements (Chubb & Moe, 1990). A first question, then, is not how some districts produce superior results but how they even manage to establish and maintain a coherent reform agenda.

In response to this question, consider the notion of civic capacity (Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001). Civic capacity entails the mobilization of a broad coalition of disparate interests to cooperate in addressing a commonly defined problem on a sustained basis. As Smith (2004) points out, civic capacity emphasizes “power to” rather than “power over”—the power to accomplish individual or group goals by accomplishing broader civic goals.

Like social capital, civic capacity involves relationships of trust and reciprocity—social relationships that facilitate cooperative action (Coleman, 1990). Stone construes social capital as largely private, interpersonal, and informal. Civic capacity, on the other hand, is public, involves major groups and institutions across sectors such as community-based and advocacy organizations, business associations and chambers of commerce, unions, general city or county government, and school districts themselves, and preferably is formalized in collaborative organizations or compacts with reliable funding and significant staffing. As Putnam (1995) has observed, social trust and reciprocity can extend to contexts beyond those in which they originate, but Stone argues that political skill and deliberate effort are required to overcome the inter-group tensions associated with group identity and advocacy and to organize cooperative action across sectors. Particularly when trusting, interpersonal relationships span group boundaries, social capital may be a resource for skilled political leaders to use in building civic capacity, although social capital does not necessarily engender civic capacity.

Similarly, the problems around which civic capacity is mobilized may grow out of troubling situations, but political leaders must give problems
clear and shared definition if they are to serve as a basis for cooperative action. In the sphere of urban redevelopment, the short term material and political benefits derived by cooperating groups, such as contracts for minority businesses in return for political support for rezoning, play a substantial role in sustaining coalitions. In education, however, the ability of political leaders to persuade actors to view their long term individual and group interests in the frame of a broader civic vision may be more important. Defining problems in community-wide terms can help affect this shift in perspective, as can public forums that call on participants to see themselves as civic leaders rather than solely as representatives of private or group interests.

Stone and colleagues offer El Paso and its Collaborative for Academic Excellence as a robust realization of civic capacity mobilized to address educational problems. Community-wide concern about overall low performance and a large gap between the achievement of Anglo and minority students on Texas’s state assessment prompted civic leaders to create the Collaborative. Key organizers included a broad array of leaders from educational institutions (three K-12 districts, a community college, and a university), religious organizations, business organizations, and general government, in the form of the city mayor and a county judge. Outside support has come from federal and foundation sources as well as major national education reform networks. According to Stone, over an eight year period the formalized staffed organization helped to bring overall performance levels up and to close gaps on state assessments. Pass rates for Hispanics rose from 36.2 percent to 87.4 percent, those of African Americans from 32.3 percent to 82.2 percent, and those of whites from 63.1 percent to 93.2 percent.

Many of the district case studies cited earlier deal almost exclusively with administrative leadership and give little attention to the political dynamics through which a dominant focus on instruction was established and maintained. In this sense, the evidence on political dynamics in El Paso is thin but suggestive.

For example, coalitions less fully-developed and formalized but similar to El Paso’s figure in a study of four relatively high performing, equity-oriented districts in Texas by Skrla and her colleagues (Skrla et al., 2000). In these districts, disaggregated data from the Texas school accountability system prompted “local equity catalysts” to pressure local school boards and superintendents for action to close performance gaps between white and minority students. These local equity catalysts included advocacy groups for the interests of minority students as well as district courts overseeing desegregation. In some districts, the advocacy groups were supported by the local business community in an informal coalition of the clients for the school district’s services (parents and students) with the clients for the district’s products (employers).

Important as the external pressures were, Skrla and her colleagues (2000) contend that the pressures would have been inadequate to initiate effective action without a reciprocating ethical response by school board members,
Toward a Theoretical Account

the superintendent, and other district officials. District leaders claimed to have acted not solely in response to external pressure, but because once confronted with the discrepancies revealed by disaggregated achievement data, they came to see that taking action to close the gaps was “the right thing to do.” Often, they cited personal religious convictions as a factor in their interpretation of and response to the data and pressures. Though Skrla and her colleagues did not study contrasting, less effective districts, they point out that disaggregated data from the state accountability system was widely published throughout the state, that minority advocacy groups and business people were stirred to action in many communities, but that only in a modest number of districts did scores rise and equalize so sharply as they did in the four districts they studied. Thus, they argue, state policy put pressure on all local districts, but in some it triggered local community leaders to intensify the pressures, thereby awakening “ethical responses” by district leaders. In these districts, superintendents became political champions for reform agendas they did not initiate but did take up and help sustain.

The level of civic capacity in Skrla’s districts appears to have been substantial if somewhat lower than that in El Paso. Cross-sectional coalitions involving ethnic advocacy groups, business, and education were created by active political leadership from these sectors. Community and education leaders defined the problem in civic or even moral terms extending beyond the self-interests of participating groups. They used both local social capital and state policy as resources. Moreover, they sustained the effort over a period of several years, resulting in performance gains and gap reductions that exceeded average statewide improvements. The coalitions may have been narrower and less formalized than in El Paso, but they did permit convergence on a common problem definition and a focused reform agenda: to improve and equalize instructional outcomes. Firestone (1989) has also shown how the formation of a dominant coalition can position local leaders to “use” state policy as an instrument for district level reform.

In other cases, it is less clear how the focus on high and equitable outcomes was initiated. For example, Elmore and Burney (1998a) simply mention that one motive for the reforms in New York’s District # 2 was a desire to improve the district’s citywide ranking in the New York Public Schools’ assessment system. They portray Superintendent Anthony Alvarado as a dynamic self-starter and inventive leader—a political champion for a unified instructional focus. Their interest was strictly in the dynamics of Alvarado’s administrative leadership within the district. For this reason, it is unclear what role leaders and groups from other sectors may have played in initiating or sustaining the reforms. Alvarado may simply have taken the initiative to make the improvement of student outcomes his administration’s top and virtually exclusive priority. A well-placed observer confided confidentially, however, that both the citywide administrative leadership and the leadership of the United Federation of Teachers needed an exemplar of success to counter negative publicity and flagging public confidence in the city’s schools. District administrators and union leaders thus joined forces to facilitate actions that might otherwise
Coherent, Instructionally-Focused District Leadership

have provoked serious opposition, including large scale replacement of principals and teachers whose skills or priorities were unsuited to Alvarado’s instructional reform agenda. Alvarado and his colleagues also worked closely over several years with the principals whom they retained or hired as they gradually pieced together the coordinated strategy detailed below. The trust and legitimacy built up through extended face-to-face interaction seems to have helped sustain the reforms.

In the case of San Diego, the impetus for reform arose from public concern about low scores on standardized tests, business leaders’ concern that the skills exhibited by applicants for entry level work were worsening while the skill demands of jobs were rising, and a general sense on the part of community and business leaders that the district was “stuck” in unresponsive and unproductive bureaucratic patterns (Hess, 2005; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005). Rather than an educator, the school board hired as superintendent Alan Bersin, a tough former district attorney. Bersin concentrated on championing an instructionally-focused reform agenda externally and engaged Alvarado from New York to provide internal leadership. Unlike the slower-paced, collaboratively-developed approach Alvarado took in New York, Bersin and Alvarado pursued a “big bang” strategy in San Diego (for particulars, see below). Behind the “big bang” approach was the premise that the leadership had to move quickly to shake up entrenched bureaucratic forces. Bersin and Alvarado feared that a more measured pace would allow administrative baronies and union opponents time to mobilize. Unfortunately for the two leaders, their swift action to eliminate over 100 central office positions and replace large numbers of principals and teachers sent “ripples of terror” through the district, exacerbated tensions lingering from an earlier strike, and led to recurring resistance. Despite Bersin’s active public- and board-relations efforts and early success on a major bond issue, a 3-2 split on the school board grew more worrisome. By the end of the third year of the reforms, the situation had become “politically unstable.” Within a few years the “big bang” backfired, Alvarado left, and Bersin was replaced (Archer, 2002; Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006). However carefully Bersin may have cultivated alliances with business and community groups, the abrupt personnel and role changes alienated organized teachers, principals, and some central office administrators. With their allies on the board and in the community, they proved more formidable political adversaries than Bersin had anticipated.

In spite of Bersin’s failure, McLaughlin and Talbert (2003) declare it a “myth” that local politics will inevitably disrupt efforts to establish and maintain instructionally focused reforms. In their report on research in San Diego and a set of Bay Area districts, McLaughlin and Talbert cite evidence that teachers and principals do not resist a strong central office role if they are adequately involved in setting goals and choosing means, if they believe the central office treats them fairly, and if they see central administrators learning and adjusting along with them.

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Toward a Theoretical Account

continuity through leadership changes (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003, p. 23). In the Texas districts studied by Skrla and her colleagues (2000), concord was established largely during implementation rather than through initial strategic planning. By building a culture of beliefs shared across levels of the system from the board to the classroom, district leaders helped ensure that goals remained stable through several leadership changes.

O’Day (2002) suggests that evidence of progress generated by district accountability systems can also help sustain support for reforms. If so, state accountability systems may provide stabilizing support, especially where local leaders publicize and use the evidence effectively.

To summarize, in some communities relatively modest levels of civic capacity seem adequate to overcome the forces of fragmentation that forestall improvement in many districts and to permit establishment of improvement and equalization of instructional outcomes as the dominant district goal. Convergent dissatisfactions leading at least to informal coalitions (as in the Texas and San Diego cases) do seem to help get reform under way and sometimes to produce significant results, but apparently the coalitions need not always be quite so broad and formalized as in El Paso. Given some level of external pressures for improved performance along with adroit political leadership, even alliances between district administrators and important internal constituencies (as in District #2) may be sufficient. As Stone and his colleagues argue, political leadership seems crucial to give troubling circumstances a definition that subsumes distinct group interests within a broader civic or moral agenda. However, political leadership that sacrifices the interests of important groups to the reform agenda rather than subsuming them within it may provoke resistance, as was the case in San Diego. When the dominant coalition has a narrow edge over rivals, swift pre-emptive action against anticipated resistance from “entrenched interests” may produce or exacerbate the very resistance it seeks to preclude. As explored more fully in the following section on administrative leadership, careful cultivation of legitimacy and trust may weave and preserve a cultural fabric of support for reforms within the district. Finally, assessment and accountability systems seem to play a larger role in triggering and maintaining local civic capacity than Stone acknowledges, whether they are state systems as in El Paso and Skrla’s Texas districts; or citywide and state systems as in District #2 and San Diego. Assessment and accountability systems often create the “trouble” or tension necessary to drive the narrative plot of reform forward, even if it does take a skilled political protagonist to give it a productive resolution.

The Political System and the Dynamics of Motivation, Capacity-building, and Resource Use

How do the processes in the political system shape motivation, capacity, and resource use in districts that achieve high and equitable outcomes...
...contemporary assessment and accountability systems specify goals, measure them with sufficient precision to permit evaluation of districts’ and schools’ performance in key academic domains over time, and attach positive and negative consequences to goal attainment.

Coherent, Instructionally-Focused District Leadership

through a coherent instructional focus? The formation of a dominant coalition and the emergence of one or more internal champions of high and equitable outcomes appear to promote the first essential step toward district-wide coherence: goal establishment. Elementary as it may seem, our account begins with the proposition that many districts fail to produce high and equitable learning outcomes because they never establish the attainment of such outcomes as a clear, pre-eminent goal. In some districts, the goal of high and equitable learning outcomes may be established rhetorically yet lack the driving power provided by a dominant coalition and political champion or champions. Other districts may establish the goal but stall out when a shaky coalition collapses. Still other districts simply fail to establish the goal altogether.

According to one prominent line of organizational theory, the fragmented policy environment in which American public schools operate creates diffuse, conflicting incentives. Together with a weakly developed technical core, these conflicting incentives encourage schools to adopt socially sanctioned organizational structures and practices rather than structures and practices designed to maximize technical efficiency (Bidwell, 1965; Meyer & Rowan, 1978; Rowan & Miskel, 1999; Weick, 1976; Weick & McDaniel, 1988). As a consequence, the administrative systems of most school districts take on the character of the typical district sketched earlier. These districts lack coherent connections between their ostensible goals and ongoing operations as well as between levels of the system, between one school and another, and between one classroom and another.

The district case literature suggests that the accountability movement as expressed in state assessment and accountability systems, taken together with the amplifying processes in local districts’ political systems just outlined, has begun to alter the institutional and technical environments within which local schools and school districts operate. These two forces have powerful implications for their administrative and professional systems.

Today’s assessment and accountability systems specify goals, measure them with sufficient precision to permit evaluation of performance in key academic domains over time, and attach positive and negative consequences for schools and districts to goal attainment. From an institutional point of view, the fundamental terms in which the public defines a “good school” seem to have begun shifting from inputs, such as attractive and up-to-date facilities, extensive curricula, highly credentialed teachers, and small classes, to measured student learning outputs. From a technical point of view, goals are better specified and measured. While the contingent nature of practice may minimize productive routines, the basis for professional judgment in schools, though still unevenly applied, resembles the state of practice in other professional organizations more closely than it did two decades ago (Weick & McDaniel, 1988).

To date, these shifts in the institutional and technical environments of education appear to be really powerful in only a few districts. Perhaps the direct effects of state accountability systems must be amplified by the
kinds of local political processes described above. In turn, these political processes depend on the convergence of several factors that vary from district to district. Opfer, Henry, and Mashburn (2008) report examples of district variability in response to state accountability. In districts where dominant coalitions have emerged and do amplify the pressures for high and equitable student outcomes, the local environment for the administrative system favors rational efficiency to a substantially greater extent than before. At the same time, these environments are less likely to accept administrative systems based on input-dominated images of the good school.

While the political system may initiate and sustain the process of focused improvement, it is the administrative system that transmits pressures and supports to principals, teachers, and other agents throughout a district. Furthermore, it is mainly the administrative system that builds or fails to build the capacity to respond effectively to the pressures. It is mainly the administrative system that either concentrates resources effectively to support goal attainment or disperses them fecklessly. Thus, the effect of the political system on motivation, capacity building, and resource use in coherent, instructionally-focused districts is largely through its influence on the administrative system.
To understand how the administrative systems of more coherent, instructionally-focused districts operate, it is helpful to group the multitude of disparate administrative activities normally under way in any district into four major functions:

1) *Executive Management.* To varying degrees across different districts, top administrative leaders formulate a guiding overall strategy to pursue district goals and coordinate instructional guidance, human resource development, and support operations (see below). To similarly varying degrees, top leaders also concentrate the allocation of financial resources to support goal-focused performance in these areas, or allow resources to flow in a manner consistent with traditional organizational divisions and practices. They also differentiate their treatment of schools with varying capacities while preserving focus on district goals, and harmonize the professional and the administrative systems by legitimizing district goals and strategies among principals, teachers, and other practitioners.

2) *Instructional Guidance.* Instructional guidance (Cohen & Spillane, 1992) involves the creation and use of formal administrative structures and tools designed to shape what is taught and how it is taught in the district. This includes the specification of instructional goals and objectives and the selection of curricular materials and instructional methods. Instructional guidance also refers to the alignment of the enacted curriculum with district goals and objectives and the coordination of curriculum across and within schools and grade levels. Important components of instructional guidance are to monitor whether and how the curriculum and instructional methods are implemented at all levels along with follow-up corrective action, to provide supplementary and second chance instruction for students at risk of falling behind, and to oversee assessment and accountability for instructional outcomes.

3) *Human Resource Development.* Human resource development includes the recruitment, selection, evaluation, professional development, assignment, and retention of key central office administrators, principals, and teachers. As with instruction guidance, carrying out these processes often involves the creation or modification of identifiable administrative structures and tools. Working in concert with and upon the professional system (see below), human resource development builds up and maintains the district’s human and social capital. As the “student as worker” slogan suggests, students are
not solely the objects of instruction: to the degree that instruction is effective, they are active participants (Cohen & Ball, 1999). Thus student assignment, student grouping, and practices designed to promote student engagement are also usefully conceived as part of a district's human resource management.

4) Support Operations. Support operations include such non-instructional units and activities as financial management, safety assurance, parent and community relations, transportation, building maintenance, food services, and the like. The main issue here is whether support operations are made subordinate and instrumental to instructional goals and to the instructional guidance and human resource development functions that promote those goals.

The executive management exercised by the administrative leaders of the district in response to goals set in the political system determines the strength and coherence of the instructional guidance, human resource development, and support operations. Further, the strength and coherence of its instructional guidance and human resource development, backed up by support operations and complemented by the professional system (see below), shape the instructional effectiveness of a district.

The Administrative System In Coherent, Instructionally-focused Districts

Executive Management

We infer from the case literature that leaders of coherent, instructionally-focused districts develop and pursue a comprehensive, internally consistent strategy to improve student outcomes, although they may do so in different ways.

In New York’s District #2, the strategy evolved over several years as Superintendent Alvarado and a few close colleagues gradually unified their understanding and operational grasp of initially disparate activities (Elmore & Burney, 1998a, 1998b, 1999). The Texas districts studied by Skrla and her colleagues (2000) seem to have undergone a similar evolutionary process. In several Bay Area districts, by contrast, the strategy was developed near the outset of reform through a structured, broadly participatory planning process which produced an explicit framework that captured and helped to communicate the goal and strategy (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). Perhaps because San Diego’s reform leaders built upon the Alvarado-led evolution of strategies in New York District #2, a unified strategy seemed to have emerged early in the Bersin-Alvarado administration (Hess, 2005; Hightower et al., 2002). However, differences between the NYC and San Diego contexts ultimately confounded the effort to transport district instructional reforms from one context to the other (see Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006 for an account). Following a corruption scandal in Duval County, the state of Florida brought in a retired Air Force major general to serve as superintendent. He developed a strong, unified
strategy around the America’s Choice comprehensive school reform model and led implementation of the model in many of the district’s 150 schools (Supovitz, 2006).

A deceptively obvious step in strategy development highlighted in the District #2, Texas, and Duval cases is the recognition that to improve learning outcomes, the leadership—and, indeed, everyone else in the district—must work to improve instruction (Elmore & Burney, 1999; Skrla et al., 2000). One might have thought that a decision to improve learning outcomes would lead ineluctably to a corresponding decision to work at improving curriculum and teaching. Not so, according to these cases. District leaders interviewed by Elmore and Skrla take pains to point out that the decision to focus squarely on the improvement of curriculum and teaching—albeit through a complex matrix of means—was a distinct and fateful step in their district reform processes. With Peterson and McCarthey, Elmore (1996) had shown earlier how individual school restructuring leaves student outcomes untouched when it focuses on managerial, structural and process issues without explicitly addressing curriculum and instruction. Further, Ogawa, et al. (2003) tell of a district that adopted standards and aligned criterion referenced tests but failed to influence instruction because there was no corresponding instructional vision to animate teachers and administrators. Changes in structure and process at the school and district levels may indirectly improve student learning, but only if they are deliberately connected to changes to what is taught and how it is taught and learned in classrooms.

A leadership strategy, then, can evolve through extended cycles of action and reflection or be created through comprehensive planning processes more compressed in time. Either way, the leadership strategy in coherent, instructionally-focused districts includes steps to align the several units responsible for the instructional guidance, human resource development, and support operations and focus them on the improvement and equalization of student learning outcomes to the near exclusion of other goals. Furthermore, an integral component of the overall strategy is a set of tactics for preserving consistent goals and standards while differentiating administrative treatment of schools that vary in their levels of instructional capacity. Elmore and Burney (1998a) offer a detailed and nuanced account of the tactics that District #2 leaders used to differentiate among schools. These leaders gave most attention to schools on the cusp of improvement and modest reinforcement to those already performing well. In some low-performing schools, they temporized until a change of principals could be effected. In the Duval case, the development and use of implementation rubrics was a critical executive strategy in the adoption of a comprehensive school reform model (Supovitz, 2006).

As they align and strengthen administrative functions, district leaders appear to encounter varying levels of resistance from central administrators associated with each of the functions as well as from principals and teachers. O’Day’s analysis (2002) suggests that the degree of resistance depends on the congruence of the goals and strategies set by the top district leaders with those preferred by central office middle managers,
Coherent, Instructionally-Focused District Leadership

Broad participation in the gradual evolution or systematic planning of the overarching strategy seems to help legitimize it and build trust in the top leadership (Elmore & Burney, 1998a, 1998b, 1999; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003).

In some cases, too, top leadership must accede to preferences other than their own in order to maintain overall support for the reform. Supovitz, for example, reports how Duval County Superintendent Fryer allowed certain schools to continue their direct instruction program even as he championed America’s Choice district-wide. His strategy was to promote without mandating his preferred model. The leadership of both New York District #2 and San Diego also replaced large numbers of resistant personnel and worked hard to re-educate others (Elmore & Burney, 1999; Hightower et al., 2002). But as the fragility of reform in San Diego illustrates (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2005; Hess, 2005), personnel replacement that is both large scale and rapid can be perilous, and the survival of the dominant coalition and of coherent reform seem to depend upon the flexibility and negotiating skill of political champions among top administrative leaders. Thus, adjusting tactics and pace within the overarching strategy is a pivotal component of the executive function.

Another reason why ongoing adjustment is essential is that comprehensive strategic plans are never perfectly designed and calibrated from the outset. Much of the work of aligning and strengthening the instructional guidance, human resource management, and support operations seems to be accomplished through ongoing modifications, based on feedback about how the plans actually unfold and whether they are achieving their intended effect. Thus, the creation of formal and informal feedback loops to guide top leadership action during implementation appears crucial. In fact, the presence of good feedback loops at all levels of the district is both a marker of genuine commitment to instructional effectiveness and an essential condition to its achievement. The creation and use of feedback loops to guide ongoing adjustment generally indicates that top administrators are not simply acting out a symbolic drama for public consumption, but are seeking actual instrumental results.

Finally, legitimizing the overarching strategy is important not only for political reasons—to forestall revolt and disruption of the dominant coalition—but also to help harmonize the administrative and professional systems. As shapers of the instructional environment and providers of instruction, principals and teachers operate at least as much out of personal preferences and professional values, norms, and knowledge as in response to administrative direction. Canny district leaders appear to recognize this and accommodate themselves to the professional system as they develop and carry out an overarching strategy. In fact, they seem not only to avoid unnecessary disruptions to the system of values, norms, and knowledge governing the professional system, but also to take deliberate steps to strengthen the professional communities and networks that give rise to it.
Toward a Theoretical Account

The administrative system not only unifies instructional guidance and human resource development but also subordinates support operations to them. Indirectly, the executive management promotes unity of purpose (motivation) by sending consistent messages about district goals through multiple instructional guidance and human resource development channels. It helps build capacity by focusing human resource development on the goals, curricular instructional approaches, and improvement needs specified through instructional guidance. It also builds capacity by guiding the adoption of curricular materials, instructional programs, assessment and accountability tools, and organizational structures needed to reach district goals. Furthermore, it concentrates resources in order to support unusually vigorous instructional guidance and human resource development. All support operations in the district are kept in perspective as subordinate and instrumental to high and equitable learning outcomes.

Instructional Guidance

Writing primarily about educational systems at the national and state levels, Cohen and Spillane (1992) used the umbrella term “instructional guidance” to refer to a variety of processes and instruments employed to shape what is taught and how it is taught, and to check whether it is taught effectively and actually learned by the students that the systems serves. Cohen and Spillane included professional development under the rubric of instructional guidance, and undoubtedly professional development can be an important instrument to help principals, teachers, and others understand what should be taught and how. Professional development is also an instrument of human resource management, and thus will be discussed fully in the next section.

To carry out instructional guidance, effective district leaders create or adopt administrative structures and tools focused on their instructional goals. “Administrative structures” in this sense refer to organizational units and roles specifically designed to support instructional productivity, as opposed to units and roles that simply administer funds and programs for a variety of disparate purposes in an uncoordinated manner. “Administrative tools” refer to instruments designed to guide and support instruction. Examples include strategic plans, content standards, curricular and instructional frameworks, instructional programs, curricular materials and technology, and assessment and accountability systems. Taken together, these structures and tools comprise administrative capital. That is, they become part of the standing capacity of the district to produce learning. Of course, just how productive they are depends on the district’s human and social capital. Thus, the three components of capacity mentioned earlier are human capital, social capital, and administrative capital. The administrative structures and tools used to carry out instructional guidance not only constitute one component of capacity…they also promote shared direction (motivation) and enable the concentration of resources.

Several districts exemplify the creation of administrative structures and tools focused on instructional goals. First are the Learning Communities...
Coherent, Instructionally-Focused District Leadership

into which the Bersin-Alvarado administration reorganized the San Diego Public Schools. The Learning Communities, each headed by an Instructional Leader, replaced a system based on school feeder patterns and area superintendents (Hightower et al., 2002). Learning Communities fit within and were supported by the Institute for Learning, the district’s instructional division headed by Deputy Superintendent Alvarado.

Drawing on research and development from the Pittsburgh-based Learning Research and Development Center (LRDC), the Bersin-Alvarado administration spelled out instructional priorities and approaches built around LRDC’s Principles of Learning, first in a Literacy Framework, and subsequently in a parallel framework for mathematics (Stein & D’Amico, 2002). Several of the Bay Area districts studied by McLaughlin and Talbert (2003) produced similar documents through strategic planning processes. In Duval Public Schools, Florida, a district that has seen exceptional student performance gains relative to other Florida districts with similar student composition, the central administration’s use of “snapshot” audits by administrative leaders around key implementation components such as “understanding and using standards,” and “connecting student work to standards in reading,” have assisted leaders in maintaining a data-based grasp of reform implementation (Supovitz & Weathers, 2004).

As Cobb and his colleagues have pointed out, frameworks and similar documents can be useful tools, but they do not convey their full message without substantial interpersonal communication to help people make meaning from them (Cobb, McLay, Lamberg, and Dean, 2003). Others have also noted that plans and frameworks have little impact without a broader program of face-to-face guidance, including ongoing administrative meetings and professional development that build common understanding around these tools, as well as supervision and assistance to assure implementation (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). The adoption of frameworks and plans trumpeting high and equitable outcomes could easily represent no more than the latest attempts to legitimize the current system. The presence of vigorous, well-developed programs of face-to-face guidance seems to distinguish genuinely effective districts from districts adopting these goals simply to re-legitimatize themselves in the current political climate (Ogawa et al., 2003).

In Skrla et al.’s (2000) Texas districts, top administrative leaders used ceremonial meetings with personnel at all levels to dramatize their agenda. In Skrla’s districts the symbolism was matched by instrumental action. In both the Texas districts and District #2, top leaders devoted virtually the entirety of regular administrative meetings with central office administrators, principals, and teachers as well as professional development sessions to promote understanding and acceptance of district instructional goals and approaches (Elmore & Burney, 1999; Skrla et al., 2000).

In effective districts, additional face-to-face guidance is often provided through active curriculum alignment efforts, instructional monitoring, and on-site discussion of assessment data. In the Texas districts,
Toward a Theoretical Account

Administrators led working sessions with principals and teachers to assure that the curriculum enacted in the schools was aligned with the intended curriculum specified in district frameworks, articulated vertically across grade levels and horizontally across schools (Skrla et al., 2000). In District #2 and in San Diego, top leaders conducted frequent “walk-throughs” of schools, reviewing test and other data with principals and joining with principals to observe instruction in individual classrooms, discussing their observations with principals and teachers, and writing up the results to guide principals in their ongoing instructional leadership and supervision (Elmore & Burney, 1999; Hightower et al., 2002). In Duval Public Schools, administrators used rubrics during school visits to gather evidence about key aspects of instructional reform, which was then fed back into central administration planning sessions (Supovitz & Weathers, 2004).

The leaders in the Texas districts used data from the state accountability system not only to motivate principals and teachers across all schools, but also to focus attention, resources, professional development, and technical assistance on lower-performing schools and teachers. O’Day (2002) has examined how information from formal administrative accountability systems aids in identifying problems and focusing attention on them.

A critical issue today concerns how districts manage information for multiple purposes. These purposes include providing feedback to teachers and students to facilitate individual learning, holding individuals and/or groups accountable for performance, monitoring implementation and impact of programs for decisions about them, and facilitating the learning of organizations so they can improve their support for members and spread knowledge across the system to produce better system-wide decision making (Supovitz, 2006). The range of complex problems associated with this managerial and instructional task have been revealed in current studies such as those found in the special issue of American Journal of Education, (112, August, 2006). Many districts appear to be struggling with a surfeit of data and a yet paucity of timely information for key decision-making. Instructionally effective districts are “ahead of the curve,” particularly in their attention to providing feedback, monitoring implementation and impact, and facilitating organizational learning. Less effective districts, on the other hand, concentrate primarily on holding people accountable. As one study has shown, less effective districts promote de-contextualized test preparation, while more effective districts respond to external accountability pressures with deeper and more systemic instructional improvements (see Firestone, Schorr, and Monfils, 2004).

In some coherently led districts, instructional guidance extends well beyond broad instructional frameworks to the specification of curricular materials, the pacing of instruction, and the use of particular instructional techniques. An unresolved issue in the case literature is the relative effectiveness of adopting externally designed and tested instructional programs versus constructing practices locally. This is, of course, an issue with long resonance in research on educational policy and change, dating at least to the RAND Change Agent Study of the 1970s and the ensuing...
Coherent, Instructionally-Focused District Leadership

Thus, whether local development or the adoption of an externally-developed program represents a more effective route to district-wide instructional effectiveness remains an important question for research on the district role.

The issue has re-emerged recently in association with comprehensive school reform models. It has been articulated explicitly in Cohen and Ball’s (1999) recent analysis, beginning with the argument that a major problem with Progressive reforms was that there was no “there” there—that Dewey’s ideas were generally distorted in implementation in part because they were seriously underspecified, leaving far too much for individual teachers to invent with only inspirational exhortation for guidance.

The issue is not thoroughly analyzed in the district case literature, but it has surfaced descriptively. In New York City District # 2, leaders adopted the “balanced literacy” program developed by the Learning Research and Development Center that unified the learning of teachers and students around a common conception and set of practices (Stein & D’Amico, 2002). Such a district-wide approach, developed consistently over an extended period of time, seems to have produced improvements in student achievement. LRDC programs recur, not surprisingly, in Hightower’s account of the Bersin-Alvarado administration in San Diego. Skrla and her colleagues (2000) note several uses of externally-developed programs in their Texas districts, including one district that dropped the use of a program after finding it ineffective in their context. O’Day (2002) cites an instance where district administrators insisted on an externally-developed program, disrupting a promising school level invention. This example calls attention to the general danger that adoption of externally-developed programs may lead district leaders to shift attention from results to compliance. Thus, whether local development or the adoption of an externally-developed program represents a more effective route to district-wide instructional effectiveness remains an important question for research on the district role.

Most recently, Supovitz (2006) has approached this issue by outlining eleven major functions that districts must accomplish, then arguing that “orchestration tasks” such as searching, program monitoring, network facilitation, program coordination, and resource coherence be managed by a local support organization such as a district, while “service tasks” such as curriculum development, training and professional development, and data provision, be managed by partnerships of external providers and local support organizations.

In fact, the related but broader question of what the optimal level of instructional guidance may be is not clear from the case literature reviewed here. How tight or loose should this type of administrative control be to produce the best results? Some observers construe the issue as one of an appropriate “balance” of central authority and individual school autonomy. Alternatively, the key is sometimes held to be differentiation in terms of ends and means, with authority to set standards and hold schools accountable for outcomes held centrally, and authority to decide how to meet the standards and produce the outcomes devolved to the...
individual school level (e.g., McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). Centrally-established goals are assumed to set direction, while leaving room for the exercise of school and individual discretion over means is assumed to help enlist commitment to the goals. As described above, some effective instructionally-focused districts prescribe means as well as ends, and do so in some detail.

The appropriate level of prescriptiveness may vary with the organizational capacities of individual schools as well as the levels of internal accountability felt by those who work in them. Schools not only have different levels of internal organizational capacity to respond to outcomes-based administrative accountability systems (Abelman & Elmore, 1999), but also teachers and administrators with a more- or less-developed sense of responsibility for outcomes and processes. Elmore (2003) has concluded that “high internal accountability is a necessary precondition for schools to be successful in responding to the pressures of external accountability systems” (p. 198). This seems to be born out in other research as well (e.g., Berry et al., 2003), but some district interventions triggered by data from district or state accountability systems seem to have proven effective in initially low-capacity schools from New York to Chicago to Texas (Snipes et al., 2001; O’Day, 2002; Payne, 2001; Skrla et al., 2000). Some of these appear to have involved mandated implementation of externally developed programs.

A related issue that is still less analyzed in the case literature is whether use of any particular instructional approach, such as direct instruction in literacy or constructivist teaching for understanding in mathematics, helps account for the unusual effectiveness of some districts. Resnick and Glennan (2002) argue that, to succeed in reform, a district needs both a theory of change and a theory of instruction. LRDC’s High-Performance Districts program implements this notion, but at this point evidence on the question seems scant.

Whether programs and practices are developed locally or adopted from outside, and whatever the instructional approach they embody, effective districts appear to provide multiple and varied opportunities for students to learn a demanding curriculum. Other research has shown that insisting that all students take a demanding course of study improves and equalizes outcomes without incurring the negative side effects feared by some (Adelman, 1999; Jones, 1993; Porter, 1998). The first “pass” through a demanding curriculum generally leaves a substantial minority of students stranded on the shoals of various difficulties. Effective districts appear to recognize the problem and to provide “second chance” opportunities for them to catch up. Skrla and her colleagues (2000) coined the term “proactive redundancy” to designate the habit of effective district and school leaders of anticipating the potential failure of some practices and of simultaneously instituting several different practices designed to achieve the same result. Other researchers also point to the importance of supplementary or second chance learning opportunities involving individual tutoring by teachers and peers, before and after school programs, summer school programs tied closely to the regular curriculum,
Centralized control over goals and means seems to be reconciled with school level initiative through balance... differentiation... legitimacy... and trust.

Human Resource Development

Human resource development includes recruitment, selection, evaluation, professional development, assignment, and retention of key central office administrators, principals, and teachers. In instructionally-focused districts, knowledge and skills are also built through and in the midst of ordinary administrative activities such as regular meetings of district administrators and principals (Elmore & Burney, 1999). Students can be considered human resources as well. If, as Cohen and Ball have argued (1990), learning is co-produced by teachers and students interacting around materials, then how students are assigned to schools and grouped within schools is integral to the production of learning. For example, it has been shown repeatedly that concentrating students from impoverished backgrounds in schools or in tracks and classes within schools impedes learning (see, for example, Mickelson, 2001).

Leaders of instructionally effective districts pursue and choose personnel who share their goals and who have the knowledge and skills to carry them out effectively, and these leaders evaluate actual job performance accordingly. In their account of reforms in New York District # 2, Elmore and Burney (1999) emphasize the role of professional learning, but they also describe extensive replacement of principals and teachers whose commitment and capacity to deliver on the district’s instructional goals were questioned by Alvarado and his colleagues. As noted earlier, the Bersin-Alvarado administration in San Diego actually eliminated many central office jobs not closely aligned to their instructional agenda, and they replaced many central office administrators and principals seen as insufficiently knowledgeable about instructional leadership. Darling-Hammond and her colleagues offer another detailed account of how recruitment, selection, and evaluation are sometimes aligned to district instructional goals (Darling-Hammond et al, 2005).
Toward a Theoretical Account

While public school districts cannot choose their students, they can assign and group students in ways that improve or diminish the chances that they will learn successfully. In instructionally effective districts, student assignment policies minimize concentrated poverty and racial isolation. To the extent politically feasible, they distribute students across schools in proportions that approximate the ethnic and SES composition of the district as a whole. Such districts assign well-prepared and energetic principals and teachers not just to schools serving mainly well-to-do white students, but to schools serving ethnically diverse, low-income students as well. In the current era of judicial reversals of decades of desegregation orders, examples of constructive district-wide desegregation policies are growing rare, but Rorrer (2002) offers an account of the determined effort by Wake County, North Carolina district leaders to preserve racial and socioeconomic balance in their schools despite judicial withdrawal and considerable community opposition.

Considerable research suggests that effective programs of professional development for teachers share several characteristics (Cohen & Hill, 2001; Kennedy, 1999; Porter et al., 2000; Thompson, 2003). First, they focus specifically on the subject matter and skills to be learned and on how students learn the subject matter and skills. They are connected to curricular materials and assessments aligned with the subject matter and skills. Effective programs offer opportunities to observe, try out, and get coaching on instructional methods linked to the content; they involve participation by teams, departments, and even whole schools rather than isolated individuals. Finally, effective professional development programs are sustained, cumulative, and well-financed. These features are recognizable in the descriptions of professional development programs offered in the case literature on instructionally effective districts (e.g., Elmore & Burney, 1999; Firestone, et al., 2005; Stein & D’Amico; 2002; Supovitz, 2006). More effective districts design and conduct formal programs of professional development consistent with the research literature.

By contrast with the literature on professional development for teachers, research on the link between professional development for principals and student outcomes appears quite thin, but such programs seem most effective when they focus on instruction, instructional monitoring and feedback, and instructionally-oriented personnel evaluation. Like professional development programs for teachers, those for principals feature active learning cycles and are sustained and cumulative (Fink & Resnick, 2001). As discussed in the section below on the professional system, leaders of instructionally effective districts also promote professional learning for both teachers and principals by stimulating and supporting professional communities and networks within and across schools and levels of the district.

In many effective or reforming districts in the case literature, the development of human capital has been incorporated as another type of ongoing administrative activity. Elmore and Burney (1999) describe how professional development was integrated into the routine administrative...
Coherent, Instructionally-Focused District Leadership

operations of District #2. For example, monthly principals’ meetings focused on student performance data and instructional practice “walkthroughs” involving classroom observation and reflection by central administrators and principals together. Sustained, instructionally-focused connections among principals and teachers were created through a variety of devices, such as inter-visitation, mentorship, and internships. In their account, professional community was built through and in the midst of administrative action. The section on the professional system, below, elaborates on this point. Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2005) tell a similar story about capacity building in San Diego. Both districts also employed more traditional workshop formats for summer and other professional development activity, but in contrast with the common scattered character of traditional professional development, the District #2 and San Diego workshops were sharply focused on district instructional goals and methods and configured in coherent, cumulative, multi-year programs.

As suggested earlier, robust programs of professional development require substantially greater investment of financial resources than is common in most districts. Resources flow to districts from federal, state, and local sources, often with apparent or real categorical restrictions on their use. The categories often channel funds into the “pockets” of bureaucratically separate units. Partly to respect the constraints legitimately imposed by federal, state, and county or district funding sources and partly to assert their own power, district officials in various units may seek to restrict the use of funds to the programs they administer and to the sometimes narrow purposes with which they identify.

Rather than leaving resources distributed across a wide range of separate units and distinct purposes, coherent, instructionally-focused districts concentrate resources to support attainment of instructional goals—not solely but substantially on professional development. For example, in San Diego, the Bersin-Alvarado administration eliminated 104 central office jobs and reallocated the savings largely to support personnel and other expenses required for professional development. They also consolidated a total of approximately $50 million from Title I and other funds designated to support integration, school libraries, and new teacher induction and reallocated it to professional development, creating a cadre of instructional coaches and institutes to train principals and other administrators. The total reallocation represented a major shift in district budgetary priorities (Hess, 2005).

In New York District #2, the Alvarado administration set a target of 3 percent of total district outlays for spending on professional development (Elmore & Burney, 1998a). Elmore and Burney estimate that school districts rarely spend more than 1 percent of their total budgets for professional development. They describe the District #2 practice of “multi-pocket budgeting,” which broke down the traditional walls between categorical budgets and focused expenditures on the district’s instructional priorities. Furthermore, funds from multiple sources were distributed to the school level, where principals were allowed some discretion to spend them in accord with professional development plans linked to district priorities.
Toward a Theoretical Account

What ultimately matters is how districts transform financial resources into affordances that support both student and professional learning at the school level. Perhaps the most important form into which districts transform resources is knowledgeable and skilled teachers. Ferguson (1991), Ferguson and Ladd (1996), and Hanushek, Kain and Rivkin (1999) have demonstrated the strong impact of teacher quality on student test scores in Alabama, Texas, and other states. Some researchers even claim that differences in the effectiveness of teachers represent the single most important factor accounting for differences in students’ academic growth from year to year (Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997). In many districts, minority children are regularly assigned less qualified, less experienced teachers than are white children (see, for example, Mickelson, 2001). Though the district case literature gives little attention to teacher and student assignment, Ladd (1996) has pointed out that the assignment of teachers and of students are among the most powerful instruments districts can use to equalize opportunity and outcomes. Other researchers (Miles, 1995; Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1998) have documented how the distribution of teaching talent is potentially under the control of district policies and practices, despite the fact that such distributions are too often sub-optimal.

To summarize, then, administrative leaders in coherent, instructionally-focused school districts unify what in other districts are scattered and separate human resource development activities in order to shape motivation and capacity in coordinated ways. They recruit, select, and evaluate central office personnel, principals, and teachers for their commitment and capacity to pursue district goals. These processes sometimes involve large scale personnel replacement, which not only brings in people with the “right” motivations and skills, but also send a strong signal to others that the district’s goals are to be taken seriously. Furthermore, both formal professional development and professional learning that is embedded in ongoing administrative activity promote understanding of the district’s goals and strategies among people at all levels of the system. Spillane (2004) has argued that policy implementation often founders because leaders fail to build common understanding of their goals and strategies up and down the systems they lead, not primarily because of inadequate incentives and sanctions. Both formal and embedded professional developments are important to shape motivation by building understanding as well as to build capacity in the form of human capital (knowledgeable and skilled personnel). Finally, instructionally-focused districts not only unify human resource development activities, but also concentrate substantially more financial resources to support them than do districts that are less singularly focused on producing high and equitable learning outcomes.

Support Operations

Operating a school district has been compared with running a small city. Getting students to and from school safely, feeding them, building and maintaining adequate facilities and equipment, organizing extracurricular activities, running a payroll, and dozens of other activities are necessary...
Coherent, Instructionally-Focused District Leadership

for districts to operate. Some support operations are of a still higher order, such as maintaining security and order for students and staff. For good reason, safety and discipline rank at the very top of most parents’ and teachers’ priority lists. Essential as these functions may be, the case literature suggests that instructionally-focused districts find ways to carry them out without becoming preoccupied with them to the detriment of instruction. In less effective districts, these functions are not subordinated to instruction and are allowed to consume a disproportionate share of the time and energy of top leaders. Still, competence in operating and maintaining district functions is a necessary handmaiden to instructional leadership because failures of management can distract and even derail instructional improvements.

Having acknowledged the importance of support operations and having argued that coherent, instructionally-focused districts subordinate them to the instructional guidance and human resource development functions, however, it is not clear from the literature how some districts manage to contain activities that are regularly reported to consume large chunks of administrative time. The parsimonious subordination of the support operations is a mystery that future research will need to clear up.

The Administrative System and the Dynamics of Motivation, Capacity-building, and Resource Use

In a nutshell, the executive management of a district shapes the dynamics of the motivation, capacity-building, and resource use indirectly by unifying them. Instructional guidance helps align the divergent motivations of dispersed actors by specifying goals, communicating and legitimizing them, providing incentives to meet them, supervising practice, and monitoring results. Tools and structures adopted or built to improve instruction constitute components of the district’s capacity to produce student learning outcomes. They enable the district to identify problems—discrepancies between goals and performance. They also provide the framework for operation of the human resource development system that builds the system-wide human capital to use the tools effectively. Through executive management, top administrative leaders concentrate resources from multiple sources to assure the effective operation of instructional guidance and human resource development. The support operations are subordinated to instructional guidance and human resource development, and this helps maintain a singular focus on instructional outcomes. However, it remains for future research to clarify how coherent district actually manage this feat.
Since the 1980s, certain reformers and some organizational researchers have argued that tightening administrative controls along the lines sketched in the previous section is inappropriate to the complexity and contingency of educational practice and incompatible with strengthening professional controls as an approach to guiding practice and improving outcomes. “Professional controls” include initial enculturation of newcomers into the values and norms of the profession by more knowledgeable, experienced members, as well as ongoing mutual regulation by members of professional communities and networks as they enforce norms concerning the ends and means of good practice.

The Holmes Group (1986, 1990, 1995), for example, issued a series of reports calling for more rigorous preparation for teachers, who would then engage in ongoing collegial exchange to solve problems in schools designed to enhance professional connections. These collegial exchanges between teachers would further strengthen their knowledge and support their judgment about how to improve student outcomes. Lieberman (2000) contrasted bureaucracies with professional networks, arguing that fluid, lateral network structures are far more hospitable to learning and innovation than are bureaucratic organizations like school districts and many schools. Rowan (1990) contrasted a professional or organic “commitment” strategy for managing instruction with a “control” strategy based on more mechanistic regulation designed to foster routine instructional practice by imposing various combinations of input, process, and output controls. In their study using work samples of “authentic student achievement,” Newmann and associates (1996) found five factors that characterize school-wide professional community: shared norms and values, focus on student learning, reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, and collaboration (see also Kruse, Louis, & Bryk 1995 and Louis, Kruse, & Associates, 1995).

Weick and McDaniel (1988) proposed a four-cell table describing strategies available to organizations with different combinations of certain versus uncertain goals, or “preferences regarding possible outcomes,” and certain versus uncertain means, or “beliefs about cause/effect relations.” With certainty about both desired outcomes and the means to attain them, a “computation strategy”—tight administrative controls over routine techniques known to reliably yield defined results—is appropriate. When
the desired outcomes are in dispute but it is clear how to produce any of them, a “compromise strategy” is called for. When desired outcomes are clear but there is some uncertainty about just how to produce them, a “judgment strategy”—in which professionals with specialized knowledge weigh the evidence and reason their way to appropriate means—is more appropriate than either computation or compromise. Finally, as is too often the case in education, when neither the desired outcomes nor the means to achieve them are clear, an organization has recourse to what Weick and McDaniel slyly call an “inspiration strategy.” To get beyond reliance on inspiration, they argue, requires organizational arrangements that permit professionals to confer with each other—to engage in sometimes extended efforts at “interpretation” of the complex, contingent problems of practice that characterize education. “Professional values” aid interpretation and are built up and maintained through regular exchange aimed at clarification of ends and means. When information is non-routine and causation is muddled, a consistent set of professional values provide guidance. When there is a disagreement between organizational values and professional values, say Weick and McDaniel, uncertainty about both outcome preferences and effective means will prevail.

Alternatively, heavy-handed administrative controls can eliminate uncertainty, but at the cost of choking off professional autonomy and dampening the intrinsic motivation—the drive to succeed with students—that draws most teachers into the profession and gives them their sustaining satisfactions. O’Day’s account (2002) centers on formal accountability systems, the role of information in them, the ways they help to focus attention on student learning amid the clamor of other goals, and the ways they help allocate resources. As she points out, however, accountability systems that are exclusively “bureaucratic” provide only broad information on students’ levels of learning in a few subjects produced annually. She argues that more fine-grained, frequently refreshed information on student outcomes and on the processes that lead to them is crucial for accurate attribution of causation and thus for adaptive rather than superstitious learning by teachers and administrators (see also Black and Wiliam, 1998; 2004, for detailed accounts of classroom instruction that support this proposition). “Bureaucratic” accountability systems, O’Day argues, that make rewards and sanctions contingent solely on formally assessed outcomes can even be counterproductive, undermining through compliance-oriented extrinsic motivators the “purposive” (efficacy-related) and solidary motivations that drive many teachers.
O’Day contrasts the “bureaucratic accountability” employed in some districts with a more productive combination of administrative and “professional accountability” used in others. By “professional accountability” O’Day refers to the regulatory action of norms for practice that develops among teachers as they work closely with each other in planning, lesson development, mutual observation, joint reflection, and problem solving. In such cases, professional communities generate fine-grained information about teaching practice through mutual observation and ongoing discussion and connect this information about practice with information about student learning gleaned from ongoing teacher-made assessments. She argues that formal assessment and accountability is needed, however, to keep teachers focused on student outcomes and to provide a systematic, external check on this professionally-derived information. Earlier, Huberman (1995) had made a similar argument about the need for external checks to prevent professional networks from degenerating into bull sessions that simply reinforce established practice. Thus, in O’Day’s view, administrative and professional accountability working together do a better job of regulating and strengthening instructional behavior than either could do alone.

Researchers have observed a parallel combination of tightened administrative controls and strengthened professional accountability in New York’s District #2 (Elmore & Burney, 1998a, 1998b, 1999; Stein & D’Amico, 2002). To be sure, the instruments of tightened administrative control in District #2 consisted primarily of direct supervision and face-to-face interaction, with only embedded use of accountability data. The complementary nature of tightened administrative controls and strengthened professional controls is broadly similar to the pattern suggested by O’Day. In a variety of ways, the Alvarado administration broke down isolation and created connections across levels of District #2. For example, district leaders met frequently with principals and “walked through” schools to observe classroom instruction with them and discuss what they had seen; principals regularly observed in classrooms and followed up with feedback and joint problem solving with teachers. Administrative action also created lateral connections across schools and classrooms, through inter-visitation, shadowing, and mentoring among principals and short and more extended opportunities for teachers to engage in similar activities. In District #2, professional community seems to have emerged as a result of and in the midst of administrative action. Elmore emphasizes the capacity-building function of these connections, but on our reading, they also served to strengthen supervision and to help build professional norms by making practice transparent to mutual observation and joint reflection. Not surprisingly, similar dynamics began to emerge in San Diego but may have been aborted by the demise of the Bersin-Alvarado administration (Hess, 2005).

In some cases, administrative action seems to follow and reinforce professional community-building. Spillane and Thompson (1997) describe, for example, how an enterprising teacher from a small rural district made connections with leading mathematics educators at a nearby university, built networks of teachers across schools within her district, and thus...
enabled many in the district to grasp key reform ideas and learn how to put them into practice. District leaders recognized the potential of her efforts early in the process and made support for the networks a matter of formal policy. Thus, social capital that was initiated informally but supported formally facilitated the development of human capital. District resources were used to support network building, and resources were used more effectively as a consequence of the networks. Recently, Cobb and his colleagues (2003) have illustrated how professional communities of practice in the organizational middle ground between structures and systems on the one hand and educational practice on the other support the improvement of teaching, and how professionally-initiated connections across multi-leveled communities of practice may help reconcile the “lived organization” with the “designed organization.” And Honig (2003) demonstrates how district policy may rise out of actions taken in the local community or the schools, reversing the arrow of influence such that policy is built out of practice.

In this account, then, district effectiveness depends not only upon the political and administrative systems but also on the professional system, which consists of person-to-person linkages among teachers and administrators, and the channels of trusted communication and the norms that arise within these linkages. Crucial here is the degree to which trusting professional relationships are built among teachers, principals, and administrators in the district’s human resource and instructional guidance systems—that is, within each of these groups, across groups, and across the district, school, and classroom levels. The facilitating effects of trust have been highlighted in a variety of contexts (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Fukuyama, 1995; Spillane & Thompson, 1997). Such relationships may take the form of professional networks, professional communities, or a specific type of professional community—the community of practice (e.g., Halverson, 2003; Wenger, 1998).

The leaders of instructionally coherent districts actively strengthen the professional system through administrative action. They do so by organizing and providing the resources to support regular, instructionally-focused interaction in a variety of formats. They bring central office administrators, principals, and teachers together for instructionally-focused meetings. They organize principal-to-principal and teacher-to-teacher mentorships, inter-visitations, joint planning, and the like. Both within and across schools, they provide resources to create time and opportunities for teachers to observe in each others’ classrooms, try out the new techniques they observe, get feedback, and go on consulting with their colleagues after returning to their own classrooms. They connect these more informal exchanges with formal professional development. They do not restrict themselves to remote administrative accountability via data and memoranda, but carry out frequent in-person visits to schools and classrooms, thus building up trusting personal connections across levels of the system. In less coherent districts, the professional system remains fragmented, underdeveloped, at odds with the administrative system, or some combination thereof.
Toward a Theoretical Account

The relationship between the professional system and the administrative system appears to be complex and subtle. Beliefs shared among frequently interacting teachers and administrators about curriculum, instruction, student learning, and assessment regulate their practice along with the guidance provided through administrative supervision and accountability. By connecting their knowledge about the instructional practices in use in their classrooms with data about outcomes, teachers can identify what is working well and what is not working well and needs adjusting. Without this complementary professional knowledge to complete the picture, data from administrative accountability systems cannot pinpoint the specific changes needed in a given school or classroom at a given time. The channels of trusted communication offered by professional networks and communities also offer avenues for the development of needed knowledge and skill through collaborative reflection and problem solving. These opportunities for professional learning complement the opportunities provided by the administrative system through formal professional development.

Localized professional communities may emerge through the initiative of enterprising teachers or administrators in any part of the system, but an interconnected configuration of professional networks and communities stretching across schools and levels throughout a district requires administrative action to promote regular, instructionally-focused interaction and to allocate the time, venues, and other resources necessary to support such interaction. As McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) argue, “The district is the system context of greatest significance for teachers’ school-based learning communities…Though it is possible for a strong school-based learning community to develop despite the district, it is unlikely that it can be sustained or extended to other schools if the district is not actively supportive” (pp. 116-17).

Localized professional networks or communities may be knit together by district officials or other agents who become legitimate members of more than one community, and through frequent interaction among members of different communities, sometimes organized around documents such as standards, frameworks, and strategic plans (Cobb, et al., 2003). Modeling thoughtful collaborative examination and revision of practices at the top levels of the administrative system may help cultivate habits of collaborative inquiry at other levels of the district, build trust, and reinforce commitment (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). Strong administrative accountability pressures for high and equitable outcomes are probably necessary to keep dispersed principals and teachers focused on instructional effectiveness. If district leaders do not work to persuade principals and teachers that district goals are genuine and legitimate, relying instead on compliance-oriented “bureaucratic” controls over practice, such heavy-handedness may undermine professional community and erode professional commitment (see also Supovitz, 2006, for elaboration on this point).
The Professional System and the Dynamics of Motivation, Capacity-building, and Resource Use

Advocates of improvement through tighter management controls and advocates of improvement through enhanced professionalism often portray the two approaches as mutually exclusive. Indeed, ham-fisted administrative action can clash with demands for greater professional autonomy and participatory management. But it appears that the leaders of instructionally effective districts recognize the importance of professional networks and communities and carry out the administrative functions of instructional guidance and human resource development in ways that do not disrupt and actually cultivate such professional interconnections. In the motivational dynamics of coherent districts, professional values and norms are strengthened substantially in the context of these professional communities and networks, and administrative leaders work to harmonize district goals with professional values and district strategies with professional norms. Thus, in these districts, normative regulation generally complements rather than conflicts with administrative supervision. Normative regulation guides the day-to-day, hour-to-hour, and minute-to-minute processes of adjusting practice to the inherent contingency of educational processes. It does so within the framework of administrative controls, but administrative controls by themselves lack the fine motor skills to guide professional practice in the turbulent environment of schooling.

Furthermore, in coherent, instructionally-focused districts, the guidance and the learning opportunities offered by the professional system complement and reinforce the instructional guidance and the learning opportunities provided by the administrative system. This helps to build human capital, a major component of the district’s capacity to produce learning. In fact, the professional system may be understood to be the district’s social capital, or much of it.

Finally, a robust professional system does not emerge on a district-wide basis without strong administrative support. Scholars—including the present authors—have often touted the importance of professional action as a strategy for educational reform, but research and experience are sobering on this point. The fabric of professionalism is a tattered one in much of American education, but the district case literature has persuaded us that coherent districts’ administrative systems can provide a firmer framework for the tapestry of professional culture.
VI

CONCLUSION: ESSENTIAL CONDITIONS FOR INSTRUCTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

In summary, when systems and functions work coherently, they promote broadly shared motivation to pursue district goals, the capacity to deliver on the goals, and the concentration of resources necessary to support goal attainment. Furthermore, the degree of focused motivation, corresponding capacity, and targeted resources in a district shape the overall level and equity of student learning outcomes not related to student family background variables.

Pervasive Shared Motivation

As noted earlier, a major challenge for district leaders is that school districts, like other organizations, are composed ultimately of many autonomous agents, each with her or his own goals and preferred strategies for achieving them. More specifically, the challenge is to focus teachers and principals sharply on the dominant goals set by the district, to get them to use well-articulated curricula and methods to improve and equalize student performance on district objectives, and to keep them committed through thick and thin.

Research has indicated that teachers are moved by such intrinsic rewards as their success with individual students and by a sense of esprit de corps, loyalty to colleagues close to hand. At the same time, research on reform indicates that scaling up success from individual teachers to entire school faculties, or even teachers district-wide has proven very difficult to launch and sustain (Elmore, 1996). Many teachers appear to need the external incentives and sanctions provided by administrative supervision and accountability systems and complemented by normative pressures from professional colleagues. However, asserting strong external pressures may run the risk of alienating teachers rather than motivating them, and of disrupting normative communities of practice rather than reinforcing them. This means a delicate balancing act is required of district leaders in combining administrative with professional press for high and equitable achievement.

Thus, two major questions are how the leaders of instructionally effective districts manage to employ external pressures (incentives and sanctions) without damping teachers’ intrinsic motivations, and how they harmonize administrative pressures with professional ones. It appears that leaders of effective districts persuade teachers that both the goals they set and their authority to set them are legitimate, reducing potential conflicts between...
intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as well as between administrative and professional regulation (Floden et al., 1988). Teachers’ expectations of students also appear to rise progressively as they experience success in demanding more of students (Skrla et al., 2000). Interpersonal bonds and the perception that top leaders are genuinely pursuing instructional improvement and are learning from their mistakes appear to create a climate of trust within which the tensions attending strong performance pressures seem tolerable and productive rather than threatening (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Thus, persuasion legitimizes the necessary administrative pressure and trust makes it tolerable; administrative pressure promotes more challenging instruction for a broader range of students; and the experience of efficacy progressively elevates expectations for student learning and promotes the emergence of professional norms governing practice.

Ultimately, it is the motivation of principals, teachers, and students that most directly affects learning outcomes. To reach principals and teachers and thereby to reach students, top district leaders must motivate the many administrators and specialists who make the links from the top of the district to the classroom level. For common goals, expectations, and attitudes to emerge at the school and classroom levels, they must be cultivated all up and down the system. Conceptualizing a variety of different actions by dispersed actors in terms of executive management, instructional guidance, human resource, and support operations offers a ready overall grip on the process of creating coherence, but care must be taken lest the language of “systems” and “functions” obscures the reality that districts are populated by individual agents who must be linked together through common understandings and commitments if concerted action is to be achieved. As Neufeld and her colleagues have shown in the reports of the Edna McConnell Clark evaluations (at http://edmatters.org/), making the links from person to person and unit to unit all up and down a district is an uncertain, difficult process.

Aligned Capacity

The term “capacity” is sometimes used specifically to refer to the knowledge and skills of teachers, including their knowledge of subject matter, how students learn the subject matter, and how to teach it. Teachers’ knowledge and skills are indeed crucial components, but as Cohen and Ball (1999) argue, classroom level instructional capacity is a more complicated matter, involving a variety of subtle interactions among teachers, students, and curricular content and materials all within an environment of considerable additional complexity. We have argued that district leadership can shape this environment in important ways, both directly through coordinated use of the “administrative capital” of structures and tools to channel motivation and strengthen capabilities, and indirectly, by providing a framework and resources to support development of the “social capital” of professional communities and networks.
Toward a Theoretical Account

Instructional capacity at the individual classroom level affects student outcomes directly, but classroom level instructional capacity depends upon the coherence and strength of the administrative and professional systems at the school and district levels. Effective schools research has emphasized the importance of “unity of purpose” and unified administrative controls at the individual school (Purkey & Smith, 1983). Within-school coherence is undoubtedly crucial, but coherence in district policy can promote coherence within multiple schools across the district. At the same time, studies have consistently shown that within-school variance on practices and outcomes typically exceeds between-school variance, so district pressures and supports are crucial not only for introducing improvements but also for sustaining them within schools as well as spreading them to more schools.

Concentrated Resources

In addition to persuasive, shared motivation and aligned capacity, the third essential condition for effective instruction is concentration of financial resources to support instructional guidance and human resource development, as well as the actual delivery of instruction. Resources in the form of teacher and student assignment practices, distribution of teacher learning opportunities, access to and use of school community resources, including parent involvement and others, and entrepreneurial generation of added resources all fall within the purview of individual schools. Construed broadly, resource allocation and use is a multi-level phenomenon, in that what is made available to teachers and to students depends on the joint actions of district and school leaders.

In sum, high and equitable student outcomes depend upon pervasive shared understanding of and commitment to the goal of high and equitable outcomes, district-wide capacity for instruction and instructional support geared to the goal, and the alignment of resources to support instruction throughout the district. The effects of coherent motivation, capacity, and resources on student outcomes are presumably mediated through a variety of student engagement and instructional processes at the school, classroom, and student levels. These intervening dynamics, however, are beyond the scope of the present report.

The account just rendered mixes descriptions derived from the case and other literature with prescriptive or normative elements, based on the selection and interpretation of relevant studies. As noted at the outset, the available evidence concerning the effects of district leadership on student learning outcomes remains slender and scattered. The argument made here represents one plausible account, emphasizing the role of coherent, instructionally-focused district leadership, acting directly through the administrative system and indirectly by strengthening the professional system and bringing it into phase with district goals and policy.

Other plausible accounts can, however, be offered and should be kept in mind as empirical work on these issues evolves. The rendering presented
here might be challenged in a number of ways. For example, the entire case literature may paint an illusory picture. Various case authors may simply have been seduced by convincing stories told by charismatic leaders of now-famous districts. Perhaps there is a great deal of superficially impressive activity that actually produces little in the way of improved or equalized student performance. In this event, careful analysis of existing quantitative data might prove productively disillusioning.

Moreover, if student performance really has improved in the districts described in the case literature, it may have done so for much simpler reasons than this account suggests—for example, because district leadership simply attracted a cadre of good teachers and principals so that many schools succeed through their own enterprise and skill, resulting in an overall rise in student performance. In such a case, the district “sets the table,” but does not exert much influence thereafter. Still another possibility is that state-wide systemic reform is the principal agent of meaningful change. There is certainly some evidence that state accountability systems, perhaps aided by concomitant state-sponsored capacity-building measures, have begun to improve student achievement in such states as North Carolina and Texas and in the province of Ontario, Canada (see, for example, Swanson & Stevenson, 2002). In that case, the crucial relationship runs from the state to the schoolhouse, without much intervening action by the district.

Despite the plausibility of these and other rival hypotheses, an account emphasizing the kind of coherent, instructionally-focused district leadership explored here deserves serious attention. Scott (1995) has noted that institutional processes can be coercive, through the action of law, rule, and administrative supervision; normative, through regulation by professional norms, as emphasized here; or mimetic, by occurring through organizational emulation within sectors. If this account is substantially correct, the nation is now witnessing in education a transformative interaction of the three types of institutional processes. State accountability legislation, amplified by local political processes, has begun to alter the institutional environments within which some local district administrative systems operate. In turn, the administrative systems are strengthening normative professional regulation within these districts. The improved results—higher and more equitable student learning outcomes—are available for other districts to observe and, over time, other districts will begin to mimic these leading edge districts. As they do so, it will be essential that they emulate the features of leading edge districts that actually produce high and equitable outcomes, rather than superstitiously adopting incidental features. Thus, research to validate or refute the account offered here is critical.
Toward a Theoretical Account

References


Coherent, Instructionally-Focused District Leadership


Toward a Theoretical Account


Coherent, Instructionally-Focused District Leadership


Toward a Theoretical Account


Coherent, Instructionally-Focused District Leadership


Coherent, Instructionally-Focused District Leadership


Toward a Theoretical Account

APPENDIX A: Methodology

Some Caveats

Although we are interested in how districts might become broadly “effective” in the sense defined earlier, most existing cases describe districts making improvements in only a few subject areas at only certain grade levels, suggesting that administrative leaders have limited their focus. Typically, the cases report results in literacy or mathematics (rarely both), often at the elementary level. One major study suggests that coherent, instructionally-focused district leadership can reduce achievement gaps among student sub-groups (Skrla et al., 2000), but the evidence on gap reduction remains thin and disputed (see, for example, Haney in Skrla and Scheurich, 2004). Another recent study (May & Supovitz, 2006) used a quasi-experimental, interrupted time series design on eleven years of student achievement data. It showed significant results of the America’s Choice model on elementary reading and math in the Rochester, New York district. This is one of the few studies that tracked district-wide growth in achievement while comparing schools with and without a comprehensive school reform model. Few studies though have tracked district graduates into postsecondary education or employment, so long-term results are not available for comparison. Evidence of effectiveness, then, is modest and typically limited to a sub-set of the indicators that arguably comprise overall district effectiveness. We have composed the ideal type of a coherent, instructionally-focused district producing high and equitable outcomes from cases that illustrate only selected components of the overall mosaic. However, we argue that the components can be assembled into a plausible, unified theoretical account, and we explain how components often held to be incompatible not only can but actually do work together in some specific districts. We propose not that any single district fully realizes the ideal type, but the more fully a district approximates the type, the higher and more equitable will be the student outcomes it produces.

Furthermore, as other analysts have noted (see, for example, Porter and Smithson, 2001), the methodological challenge of attributing causality across multiple levels of organization and across multiple processes is quite steep. Indeed, even the connection between school-level leadership and student outcomes has proven indirect and elusive (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Witziers, Bosker, & Knight, 2003). The literature on districts does not employ experimental designs, nor do most studies control for alternative hypotheses, nor include careful process tracing from administrative actions through the intended, enacted, and learned curriculum. As a result, the evidence presented here has been assembled from a selection of studies combining empirical results of varying strength with conceptual contributions. In short, we offer an interpretive theoretical account rather than a meta-analysis of rigorously conducted, similarly bounded studies. At present, such is what the topic will bear, but we judge that its importance merits the effort.
Coherent, Instructionally-Focused District Leadership

Then, too, other investigators have sought to examine the record for instances of success and their judgments may not parallel ours. Most notably, Cuban and Usdan (2003) examined reforms in six cities—Chicago, Boston, Seattle, San Diego, Philadelphia, and Baltimore—and concluded that politically powerful reforms nevertheless appeared to have “shallow roots” in three senses: civic coalitions championing reforms are difficult to sustain over the long run, creating an inviting instructional infrastructure for principals and teachers is tough organizational work, and securing and sustaining broad teacher and parent support for change is essential yet elusive. We would not quarrel with these conclusions. Rather, as we describe in detail, it is precisely work on these issues that appears to foster instructional effectiveness on a widespread basis. Sustaining such work in districts large and small is one of the great challenges facing the nation. We propose some leads on how research on this work might profitably unfold.

Finally, we are reminded of Tolstoy’s famous remark that all happy families are alike, but every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. We suspect that neither all more effective districts nor all less effective districts are all exactly alike. For example, the particular approaches that more effective districts employ to achieve coherence probably vary depending on context—on such factors as district size and wealth, student demographics, community and district history and culture, and state education policy, including but not limited to features of accountability systems. Knapp and his colleagues (2003, February) have proposed at least twenty-three functional pathways to student, professional, or system learning through which districts might become more effective, leaving open just which pathways, in what order, under what circumstances, any particular district might order its strategic choices around. Despite such contextual variations, we propose that effective districts manage the dynamics of motivation, capacity, and resource use coherently in support of high and equitable student outcomes, while less effective districts manage these dynamics with a less resolute focus on instruction.

APPENDIX B: Acknowledgements

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