

May 2017

Thank you for your request for **research on how reorganizing central office staff structures contribute to school improvement and increased student achievement.**

Ask A REL is a collaborative reference desk service provided by the 10 regional educational laboratories (REL) that, by design, functions much in the same way as a technical reference library. It provides references, referrals, and brief responses in the form of citations on research-based education questions.

Please note that REL Southwest has not done an evaluation of the resources themselves but offers this list to you for your information only.

BACKGROUND

“Central offices and the people who work in them are not simply part of the background noise in school improvement. Rather, school district central office administrators exercise essential leadership, in partnership with school leaders, to build capacity throughout public educational systems for teaching and learning improvements.” Effective central office leaders understand that “districts generally do not see districtwide improvements in teaching and learning without substantial engagement by their central offices in helping all schools build their capacity for improvement.”¹

Following an established REL Southwest protocol, we conducted a search for research reports, websites, as well as descriptive briefs on the reorganization of central office staff structures’ contributions to school improvement and increased student achievement. **We searched the references in the response from the most commonly used resources of research, but they are not comprehensive and other relevant references and resources may exist.** The sources included federally funded organizations, additional research institutions, educational databases, and general Internet searches using Google and Bing. See the methods section at the end of this Ask A REL for additional information on how we identified the following sources.

QUESTION

Portfolio Districts—How does reorganizing central office staff structures contribute to school improvement and increased student achievement?

¹ Honig, M. I., Copland, M. A., Rainey, L., Lorton, J. A., & Newton, M. (2010). Central office transformation for district-wide teaching and learning improvement. *Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy* 2010
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED517767>

SOURCES

Hillman, D. & Kachur, D. S. (2010). The can-do central office: With an eye on student achievement, Illinois district redefines its roles and goals. *Journal of Staff Development*, 31(3), 18-20, 22. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ914944>

From the ERIC abstract: "Facing a superintendent change in 2006-2007, Decatur Public School District 61 in Illinois was already confronting the major challenges of a widening student achievement gap, increasing dropout rate, and schools not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). From the beginning, Superintendent Gloria J. Davis professed several simple beliefs that resonated among all district staff: "We understand all of our children can learn and achieve at high levels. It is our responsibility, as a district, to do all we can to help them reach those high levels. All of our children can learn, and we can teach them!" However, it was going to take more than words to turn such beliefs into realities for schools. It would call for transforming the roles and functions of the central office to form a consistent, systemic partnership with schools across the district. Together, schools and the central office would establish a clear directive for teaching and learning that would generate the initiatives and efforts to make the district's vision a reality. This transformation called for the central office to take the lead in building the capacity of all staff to make sound decisions about their own ongoing professional learning that would impact student learning and achievement. The district has experienced some early success through this transformation. Graduation rates have increased to 87.9% in 2009, up from 73.3% in 2007, and 80% of the graduating seniors are moving on to higher education. The key to District 61's success was not to capitulate to pressures to return to the former modus operandi as a central office. Beginning at the superintendent's level, the district continually reinforced efforts to transform the central office to become instrumental in creating a districtwide collaborative professional learning culture, one where educators were learning from and with one another, introducing ideas, sharing practices, and making decisions that benefit the students that pass through their doors each day."

Honig, M. I. (2013). Beyond the policy memo: Designing to strengthen the practice of district central office leadership for instructional improvement at scale. *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, 112(2), 256-273. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1018511>

From the ERIC abstract: "In school districts across the country, central office staff members are working to improve how they lead district-wide instructional improvement, but are finding few guides or supports for that work, what design researchers might call limited "designs" for their leadership. Superintendents frequently elevate school-based staff to district-level leadership positions on the basis of their successes in schools, but those staff often find those positions only generally defined and minimally supported. This chapter argues for the importance of design-based leadership research (DBLR) for advancing the research and practice of educational leadership, with a focus on school district central offices. DBLR, like other design-based research, calls on researchers to develop designs for practice. Unlike other such research in education that calls for designs for classrooms, DBLR focuses on designs for leaders. Researchers working in this mode develop designs for leadership practice that reflect the latest knowledge

about how leaders matter for improved student results; they work alongside leaders to use that knowledge to design and engage in new forms of their own practice consistent with the knowledge and appropriate to their settings. Participants study the process to feed new knowledge into the partnership sites and the field. This chapter elaborates how such research differs from traditional scholarship on district central offices and forms of action research. Challenges to conducting DBLR include focusing practitioners on central offices (especially in tough budget times), capturing central office practice in DBLR knowledge-building activities, and growing and sustaining the work. Early experience illuminates how to address those challenges and advance DBLR partnerships that promise to significantly strengthen leadership practice in support of improved results for all students.”

Honig, M. I. (2012). District central office leadership as teaching: How central office administrators support principals' development as instructional leaders. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 48(4), 733-774. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ978274>

From the ERIC abstract: “Purpose: Research on educational leadership underscores the importance of principals operating as instructional leaders and intensive job-embedded supports for such work; this research also identifies central office staff as key support providers. However, it teaches little about what central office staff do when they provide such support and how to distinguish what they do as more or less supportive of principals' development as instructional leaders. This article addresses that gap with findings from an in-depth comparative case study of the work practices of executive-level central office staff in three districts dedicated to providing instructional leadership support to principals. Research Design: The conceptual framework drawn from sociocultural and cognitive learning theories identifies practices that deepen professional practice in authentic work settings. Data came from 283 interviews and approximately 265 observation hours and 200 documents. Findings: Departing from other studies that do not empirically elaborate central office work practices or that call generally for central office leadership, this analysis identified specific practices of central office administrators consistent with helping principals learn to strengthen their instructional leadership. These practices anchor a conception of central office staff in these roles as teachers of principals' instructional leadership. Key mediators of their work included their own conceptions of their roles and their opportunities to consult with colleagues, among other conditions. Conclusions: Advancing such work in practice and building knowledge about it in research will require significant shifts throughout school district systems and new approaches to the study of educational leadership. (Contains 7 notes and 1 table.)”

Honig, M. I., Lorton, J. S., & Copland, M. A. (2009). Urban district central office transformation for teaching and learning improvement: Beyond a zero-sum game. *Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, 108(1), 21-40. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ862338>

From the ERIC abstract: “Over the past 15 years, a growing number of mid-sized to large school district central offices have engaged in radical reforms to strengthen teaching and learning for all students districtwide. Such efforts mark a significant change in urban educational governance. The authors call these efforts “district central

office transformation for teaching and learning improvement." Local governance reforms of the past typically involved the reallocation of authority between central offices and schools in a zero-sum game. By contrast, central office transformation involves strengthening the authority and attendant capacity and professional practice of both central offices and schools to strengthen teaching and learning. Central office transformation rests in part on assumptions that districtwide teaching and learning improvement is a systems challenge--one that demands the full participation of people in schools, central offices, and their local communities. Unlike efforts to restructure central offices through realigning organizational charts and adding and dissolving subunits, central office transformation involves deep institutional shifts in the nature of central office administrators' work and their relationships with schools. Particularly given the profound changes in local governance and local leadership capacity that these shifts represent, the authors view central office transformation as a major dimension of the new localism. What more specifically is central office transformation? What does the emergence of central office transformation efforts imply for a next generation of educational research? This essay takes up these issues with a review of research and recent central office transformation efforts in mid-sized to large urban district central offices. In their research review, the authors highlight that an emerging wave of research on school central offices reveals the importance of remaking the daily work of central office administrators and how central office administrators relate to schools as fundamental to teaching and learning improvement. The review underscores the promise of central office transformation as a distinct educational improvement approach. The authors also elaborate on what central office transformation involves in practice, drawing on illustrations from relatively well-developed efforts currently under way in Atlanta Public Schools, New York City Public Schools, and Oakland Unified School District (CA). The authors conclude with implications of these developments for a next generation of research on educational governance. (Contains 4 notes.)"

Honig, M. I. & Venkateswaran, N. (2012). School-central office relationships in evidence use: Understanding evidence use as a systems problem. *American Journal of Education*, 118(2), 199-222. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ970815>

From the ERIC Abstract: "Research on evidence use in school districts overwhelmingly focuses within schools on how school staff work with evidence including student performance data, research, and information about teaching quality. While important, this focus on schools reflects a mismatch with federal and state policies that demand not only that school staff work with evidence but that school district central office administrators do as well. This school focus also downplays how complex, social school-level change processes such as evidence use may typically involve central office staff in implementation and vice versa. To what extent do central offices matter to school-level evidence-use processes, and do schools matter to such processes in central offices? We explore these questions with a review of research on evidence use in schools and central offices with a focus on school-central office relationships in the process. We find that central offices and schools influence each other's evidence-use processes in specific respects. We elaborate what extant research teaches about these relationships and argue that future research should aim to understand how evidence

use plays out not solely within schools or central offices but across district systems and through interactions between central office and school staff.”

Mette, I. M. & Scribner, J. P. (2014). Turnaround, transformational, or transactional leadership: An ethical dilemma in school reform. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, 17(4), 3-18. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1045045>

From the ERIC abstract: “This case was written for school leaders, specifically building-level principals and central office administrators attempting to implement school turnaround reform efforts. Often, leaders who embark on this type of organizational change work in intense environments that produce high levels of pressure to demonstrate improvement in student achievement. Educators studying this case should examine the impact on ethical leadership when implementing rapid reform efforts, particularly the pressure on school leaders at the district and building levels to employ a transactional rather than transformational approach to leadership as they respond to the pressures of turnaround school policy.”

Mizell, H. (2010). Whether a building or a state of mind, the central office must evolve. *Journal of Staff Development*, 31(3), 46-48. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ914952>

From the ERIC abstract: “The central office is both a physical place and a state of mind. In some school systems, the central office is a separate building located away from schools. In other communities, the office is housed in one of the school buildings. When someone mentions "central office," they may not be referring only to the building. They may also mean the tip of the hierarchical pyramid, the place where authority resides and decisions are made. The role of central offices looms large in efforts to reform school systems and schools. School systems are complex organizations, and central offices generally perform well in carrying out functions that enable the systems to operate more or less efficiently. But there is a difference between operating a school system and operating it so all students perform proficiently. It is this latter challenge that has prompted calls for a new central office. Different experts and critics have different proposals for what the new central office should look like, and it would benefit any school board or superintendent to study these proposals. Many districts already operate with a new central office approach, thanks to forward-thinking leaders and innovative administrative teams. In this article, the author shares his thoughts about how that function of the new central office could increase student achievement.”

Van Soelen, T. M. & Harden, D. (2015). Navigation aids: 9 shifts in practice smooth the transition from school to central office. *Journal of Staff Development*, 36(5), 22-25. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1082777>

From the ERIC abstract: “No longer is the central office a place for educators' careers to meet a dead end. Nor can it be where ineffective leaders are transferred to lessen impact. It cannot be "the blob," as coined by William Bennett (Walker, 1987). The Wallace Foundation notes that the central office has never been more important for system and individual school improvement (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010). Marzano, Waters, & McNulty (2005) articulated 21 responsibilities of school-level leadership, then turned their attention to the superintendency. This meta-analysis

(Waters & Marzano, 2006) resulted in four major findings: (1) District-level leadership matters; (2) Effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts; (3) Superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement; and (4) Effective superintendents may provide principals with "defined autonomy"--that is, setting nonnegotiable goals for learning and instruction yet allowing schools to decide how to reach those goals. This research has informed superintendent preparation programs and evaluation processes for almost a decade. According to the Education Commission of the States, 45 states have superintendent preparation programs offered by universities, associations, or a combination of the two (Education Commission of the States, 2015). In 2008, the Georgia State Superintendents Association decided to take on the issue of district office leader quality. Having successfully implemented the Superintendent Professional Development Program for 18 years already, the association had both the credibility and experience to organize the effort. In fact, the association's own data argued for the program's need. This article outlines the 9 shifts in practice that need to take place to make a successful transition, using vignettes that describe real experiences by Georgia educators. Some of these stories demonstrate a successful transition; others highlight an ongoing challenge."

von Frank, Valerie (2010). Central office plants the seeds, schools cultivate their own learning. *Journal of Staff Development*, 31(3), 38-41.

<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ914950>

From the ERIC abstract: "Every April, the staff of Stilwell Junior High School (West Des Moines, Iowa) spend a day analyzing student data together. Staff members consider standardized tests scores, look at item-by-item results and trends, and consider how groups are performing. They also look at social data, gathered from students about how the youth view their school experience, such as whether they feel engaged in their lessons and feel someone in the school cares about them. From these data, teachers glean ideas for where they will focus attention and begin to form a year-long plan for professional learning at Stilwell. In the West Des Moines Community Schools, the central office sets a vision and overarching goals, but individual schools develop their own plans for how to achieve those goals and for teachers' professional learning. Central office staff have a new role, according to NSDC's definition of effective professional learning. The definition calls for the central office and schools to share responsibility for teachers' development, but to have teachers continue their learning in the school, their workplace, to make what happens more relevant to both teacher and student learning. Central office administrators no longer hand out catalogs of workshops and invite any teacher in the district to sign up. Teachers work together on-site to analyze what their students need, determine what they need to learn to improve instruction in those areas, and then learn together, refining their practice."

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Copland, M. A. & Honig, M. I. (2010). From operations to teaching and learning. *School Administrator*, 67(11), 11-14. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ909133>

From the ERIC abstract: "For central offices to become full partners with schools in improving teaching and learning, simply defining new roles or creating new reporting

structures is not enough. Through the authors' recent central-office research, they have confirmed that creating the conditions for improved teaching and learning districtwide demands new practices within central offices--fundamental shifts in how central-office administrators go about their daily work with principals and teachers. From 2007-2008, the authors studied how district leaders in Atlanta, Georgia; Oakland, California; and New York City's Empowerment Schools Organization radically shifted how central-office administrators helped schools build their capacity for effective instruction. Their efforts amounted to a transformation of the central office. Drawing on the experiences of these school districts, the authors identify five new lines of work that they associated with creating conditions that supported principals' instructional leadership. Considered together, these lines of work constitute a new definition of central-office leadership for learning." NOTE: This source was not peer reviewed.

Honig, M. I., Copland, M. A., Rainey, L., Lorton, J. A., & Newton, M. (2010). *Central office transformation for district-wide teaching and learning improvement*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy.
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED517767>

From the ERIC abstract: "This report summarizes main results from a national study of how leaders in urban school district central offices fundamentally transformed their work and relationships with schools to support districtwide teaching and learning improvement. All three study districts had been posting gains in student achievement and credited their progress, in part, to efforts to radically change their work at the central office level. The authors aimed to understand more specifically what these central offices were doing. The study breaks new ground in educational research by uncovering the daily work practices and activities of central office administrators as they sought not just to make the central office more efficient but also to transform the central office into a support system to help all schools improve the quality of teaching and learning. The findings reveal that leaders in these systems, first and foremost, understood what decades of experience and research have shown: that districts generally do not see districtwide improvements in teaching and learning without substantial engagement by their central offices in helping all schools build their capacity for improvement. Central offices and the people who work in them are not simply part of the background noise in school improvement. Rather, school district central office administrators exercise essential leadership, in partnership with school leaders, to build capacity throughout public educational systems for teaching and learning improvements. The districts in this study were attempting to heed those lessons by engaging in an approach to central office change the authors call "central office transformation." Central office transformation is a far cry from central-office-administration-as-usual. This approach to reform: (1) Focuses centrally and meaningfully on teaching and learning improvement; (2) Engages the entire central office in reform; (3) Calls on central office administrators to fundamentally remake their work practices and their relationships with schools to support teaching and learning improvements for all schools; and (4) Constitutes an important focus for reform in its own right. (Contains 3 tables, 6 figures and 23 footnotes.) [This paper was written with the assistance of Elizabeth Matson, Liza Pappas, and Bethany Rogers." NOTE: This source was not peer reviewed.

Other Relevant Resources to Consult

- The Assessment and Accountability Comprehensive Center
<https://www.charterschoolcenter.org/resource/assessment-and-accountability-comprehensive-center-special-populations-strand>
- The Center on Instruction—<http://www.centeroninstruction.org/>
- National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing
<http://cresst.org/>
- National Center for Performance Incentives
<https://my.vanderbilt.edu/performanceincentives/>
- School Turnaround Learning Community—
<http://www.schoolturnaroundsupport.org/>
- U.S. Department of Education – School Improvement Grants
<https://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/index.html>
- Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement
<http://www.sedl.org/expertise/historical/center-for-csri.html>

METHODS

Keywords and Search Strings Used in the Searches

Central office transformation; Central office staff impact

Search of Databases and Websites

- Institute of Education Sciences (IES) website (<http://www.ies.ed.gov>) and IES sources: Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Program, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), National Center for Education Research (NCER), What Works Clearinghouse (WWC)
- ERIC database (www.eric.ed.gov)
- Google Scholar (scholar.google.com)
- Google (www.google.com)
- Bing (www.bing.com)

Criteria for Inclusion

REL Southwest selected resources that provide research on how reorganizing central office staff structures contribute to school improvement and increased student achievement. When REL Southwest staff reviewed resources, we considered – among other things – three factors:

1. Date of Publication: The most current information (primarily published from 2010 to the present) is included.

2. Source and Funder of the Report/Brief/Article: Priority was given to publications written in relevant, peer-reviewed journals or reports or produced by well-known research organizations.
3. Methodology: sources include reported studies, literature reviews and policy reports.

ASK A REL is a service provided by a collaborative of the REL Program, funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES). This response was prepared under contract ED-IES-12-C-0012 with IES, by REL Southwest, administered by SEDL. The content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.