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The central office manages and directs a school system. In the wake of district and school reforms, the impact of the central office on schools and quality instruction has not been fully dissected. This study explores the role of the central office in the support of high quality instruction. Further, it analyzes the perceptions of those central office staff members who support schools and school-based staff. The study was conducted using qualitative methodology to determine and describe the impact of Executive Directors and Directors on instruction in schools. Specifically, interviews were conducted with 22 central office staff members in one urban school district. Interviewees were questioned about their roles and their practice of instructional leadership. In addition, individuals were asked about the current reality of their work and asked to consider how their work could be different given different circumstances or constraints. Central office staff members also gave recommendations for how the central office could better support high quality instruction. Ten issues were identified based on the content of the interviews. One important finding was the need for better recruitment of central office staff members with a focus on the specific skill set needed for their work. A critical discovery was the lack of direct influence and involvement of central office staff with school-based principals and other school-based administrators. The level of collaboration between central office staff and school based principals was largely absent which is ironic considering the current research on the importance of the principal in the process of school reform.

THE ROLE OF CENTRAL LEVEL STAFF IN SUPPORTING HIGH QUALITY INSTRUCTION

by

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_____
Committee Chair

To my greatest sources of strength and encouragement on this earth –

My wife, Jennifer,

my parents, Don and Dona, and

my children, Connor and Karsyn.

There was never a time that they doubted me. I am rich beyond my wildest dreams.

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I am thankful for the wisdom of my grandparents.

Though gone from this world many years, I carry with me some of their spirit.

It's the dedication of a farmer, the compassion of a nurse,

and the sweet soul of a smart southern lady. I am proud to be the child of their children.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Matthew Tanner Gamble has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> We have heard this story over and over again: the brilliant entrepreneurial leader who saves the company from ruin (think Jack Welch), the military figure whose personal genius and charisma lead to victory (think George Patton), the athlete who saves us from defeat through this personal gifts and force of will (think Michael Jordan), or the principal who single-handedly turns a school around (think Joe Clark in the movie *Lean on Me*). Leaders solve our problems because they not only have the answer – they *are* the answer. However, effective leaders recognize that they cannot accomplish great things alone. They also recognize that the ability to lead is not the private reserve of a few extraordinary people or those in particular positions of authority.
> (DuFour, R. & Marzano, R., 2011, p. 1-2)

Jack Welch, George Patton, Michael Jordan, Joe Clark and others are well known for their passionate example of how a leader can inspire others to lead. All of these individuals were inspired at some point by a teacher. Many adults could probably recall one or two great teachers who impacted their lives in some way just as Jack Welch and George Patton also had the benefit of being impacted by a teacher in their lives. Leadership is: "Not the private reserve of a few extraordinary people or those in particular positions of authority" (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 1-2). Rather, leadership is how others are inspired to greatness themselves.

Just as a teacher impacts the life of a student, others in educational leadership positions impact the work of the teacher. Teachers working together as professional learning communities have the ability to share their ideas, learn from each other, and

even hone their individual strengths to meet the needs of students. Professional learning communities represent: “An ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). How does the collective district function as one large professional learning community to best support school staff and impact instruction?

As a principal of an elementary school, I see the power of collaborative work each day. I could not have imagined, however, that as a classroom teacher well before the days of professional learning communities, that I would be curious about the collective work of an entire school district to support the work of instruction in classrooms. Marzano and Waters (2009) identified “collaborative goal setting” and “establishing nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction” as two components of successful district leadership in relationship with academic achievement. They do not state specifically, however, that the district level leadership should operate as a PLC, but these first two tasks are important as teachers meet in professional learning communities. How are the leaders at the central office level both leading and teaching school-based leaders and staff across schools, subjects, and grade levels to reform and refine the work of instruction to best meet the needs of students?

I have experienced the work of the central office in very different ways as I worked at different schools throughout one district. Early in my career while at a higher performing school, central office staff members toured the school about two times per year. Several individuals, who always seemed cold and straight faced, would walk from

the door to a student in my classroom, examine the work on the desk with a passing glance, look at what was posted in the room, and walk out the door. As a teacher mentor, I experienced similar walkthroughs by district officials but this time they were much more intense because the school was more "at-risk" as deemed by standardized test scores. These walkthroughs occurred almost every week by the same group of individuals. At higher performing schools, I never had any feedback offered, but as a teacher mentor at lower performing schools, I met with these individuals after touring the building. While I believed they were meant to support the school, I often found their feedback only at the surface level. For example, feedback was given to the administrative team and I as: "Ms. Laird has too many commercially made posters on the wall. Ms. Shield's music class was out of control." While well intentioned and sometimes related to instruction, the conversation never seemed to go past what was posted on the walls or how many sheets of paper were used. I often wondered, why the "observers" were not observing a professional learning community meeting in action. In this way, observers could witness the dialogue among teachers in a content or grade level and see how it focused on instruction and students.

Similarly, I have interacted with numerous central office level staff members throughout my career. While working with a struggling Spanish teacher who had no resources with which to teach, I could not get the district Foreign Languages Director to return my calls for weeks. When she did visit the school she was quick to say that she did not have anything in terms of resources to offer the teacher but would try to facilitate a connection between that teacher and another Spanish teacher at another school. A short

time later this district level official retired and was not replaced for several months. Why was this individual not instrumental in setting up regular time for other foreign language teachers to collaborate together in a professional learning community?

Another example involves science instruction. There was much work done over time to support science instruction in the district and district leaders worked with classroom teachers to develop and train teachers with new science kits. This was an extremely positive program which allowed teachers to have support with science instruction. Sadly, the program was not funded after a while and teachers did not have the needed resources to sustain the kit program. It was then up to schools to supply the needed items for teachers but there was no longer an organized system for training new teachers with the programs. District support was needed to help teachers become trained in implementing the inquiry-based science kits.

There was even more work done at the district level to develop and implement a strategic plan. Goodlad (1995) and Freire (1970) have long stated the need for collaborative goal-setting involving everyone including the superintendent, school board members, principals, teachers, students, and community members. A new Superintendent was in place at the beginning of the process and it allowed him to meet both staff and community members. Much work was done to involve the community and teachers in its development. Accelerated academics was of critical importance to the plan, but I wonder how the strategic plan was driving the work of the central office and how it might be evident in prioritizing their daily tasks. One thing is clear- central office staff experience a high rate of turnover which causes uncertainty about who exactly is supporting various

district programs among school based staff members. In addition, many school districts begin initiatives such as the science-kit program and then lose funding to train teachers so that the initiative can continue. Since 2001, as a teacher, mentor, and administrator in a school district, I have seen the development of many central office initiatives and the fluctuation of central office positions. How does the work of visioning for a district link with the decision making practices of the central office for various initiatives, teacher training, and funding?

I believe that leadership and collaboration at all levels, as described in professional learning communities, is needed for high quality instruction to occur in K-12 classrooms. Teachers need the support of strong instructional leaders at the school level, but also benefit from strong leadership at a district level that is focused on the needs of students (Lewis, 2010). How do districts organize leaders and orient key curriculum and instructional positions? How do superintendents and central office staff ensure that curriculum and instructional support positions are actually supporting teachers, the instructional leadership of principals, and thus student learning? I have often wondered about the kind of support that central office staff offers to promote high quality instruction and thus, to raise student achievement.

This research will study the role of central office instructional staff in supporting high quality instruction in schools. The above stated questions are speculative, but are based on the researcher's personal considerations while working as a teacher, new teacher mentor, and administrator. The stated questions will provide the basis for the literature review.

Problem Statement

Effective schools research of the late 1970's and 1980's initially ignored the role of the district office calling their impact, "Irrelevant when it came to developing effective schools" (Lezotte, 2008). It was believed that,

> School staff could implement the correlates of effective schools at any time. No particular outside help or support was required, since no outside help or support was found to be associated with the schools that were already found to be effective. (Lezotte, 2008, pp. 13-14)

However, they would later retract this statement as effective schools were not able to sustain their work when the principal left without the support of the district (Lezotte, 2008). The notion that reform cannot be sustained without the support of the district office is a profound assertion. Marzano and Waters (2009) have found that district leadership can have: "A measurable effect on student achievement" (p. 12). Therefore, what are the district practices, programs, and policies that result in this accelerated and sustained achievement? Are there links involving professional development, curriculum planning, or sharing instructional strategies at the district and school level? How does the work of those not in direct support roles for instruction make an impact? All of these questions are essential to consider in how the district level supports its schools and school-based leadership.

Public school district offices must remain focused on the work of supporting schools and, most significantly, its students. Central office staffs have many tasks to complete on a daily basis, but I wonder how many of these tasks directly support quality instruction in schools. While some tasks, such as budget maintenance, facility uprades,

and communication with principals, may support the work of quality instruction, more specific and focused efforts are needed by central office personnel for a more defined level of support. I would like to gain insight into how central office instructional leaders might transform the central office's vision away from a managerial philosophy to becoming the learning leader for the district.

Current research somewhat outlines the role of the district in helping to support student achievement. Andero (2001) surveyed superintendents to determine how changing educational and instructional policies impacted their work. Andero (2001) stated that many factors such as changing legislatures, laws, and court rulings have changed the work of Superintendents to be more focused on student achievement. How does this change in focus trickle down to the work of the central office? Sofo (2008) elaborated on the role of the district in choosing the correct individuals to lead schools and referenced choosing the correct middle school principal to replace one who was retiring. The individual had experience at the elementary level, but: "While the new middle school leadership might be perceived by some as an impediment to the change process already under way, the district saw it as an opportunity to consider the target program's reform strategies through fresh eyes" (p. 399). Sofo (2008) argued for a more bottom-up approach to instructional change in schools as opposed to top-down. Does the district leadership carefully analyze the needs of schools when there is a leadership change? Furthermore, how does a district ensure they are aware of the needs in schools? Honig (2010) asserts that: "Decades of experience and research show that when central office staff do not exercise central leadership in teaching and learning improvement

efforts, such initiatives at best produce improvements at a small handful of schools but hardly district-wide or in a sustainable way" (p. 1).

While the district may be focused on the work of instruction, it is essential to consider the depth and scope of their work as it relates to the school level. There are usually a number of district programs and policies to support instruction, but how are these programs initiated and monitored to see how they connect with quality instruction? Burbach (2010) spent time with 10 talented principals assigned to turning around low performing schools. These individuals were essentially a Professional Learning Team and supported each other as they worked to improve student achievement. I wondered how this could be expanded to consider how key central office personnel in support roles impacted the principal's work to improve student achievement. As part of one study, Plecki (2010) began to explore the tasks conducted by those in a direct instructional support in a school. When asked about her work, an instructional facilitator stated: "I look at data, I analyze data… I look at lesson plans… critique lesson plans, do informal observations… and also prepare reports for my principal… [I provide] professional development training… and also look at the type of trainings that we might need" (p. 56). This statement makes me consider the role of those in teacher support roles and how the district works to support these individuals who support teachers. It seems as if the tendency is to relate district level support to higher student achievement. Perhaps a more important question to consider first would be how a district supports the quality instruction in classroom which leads to higher student achievement.

The purpose of this study is to examine how the central office personnel in one school system in North Carolina support K-12 schools to promote high quality instruction and student achievement. While research outlines the key role of the school district in supporting high student achievement (Sofo, 2008; Honig, 2010; Plecki, 2010; Burbach, 2010; Andero, 2001), very little research provides exemplars for concrete strategies districts can adopt for teaching and learning transformation. In addition, it seems as if most research studies remain in the theoretical realm and do not often talk about how to be in direct support roles to examine the work of the school and its impact. I will focus on the following research questions to guide my study:

- What role does central office staff perceive themselves playing in supporting high quality curriculum and instruction?
    - How does a contemporary central office function to support instruction?
    - How could a central office adapt to best support quality instruction?

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

School reform efforts must be explored before I examine, in a formal study, the role of central office district leadership for instruction and learning. This is because the work of public school districts has changed dramatically over the last 50 years as a result of national and state involvement in education policies. The concept of central office leadership for learning was not present in educational language twenty years ago. Instructional leadership at the school or school district level was also absent. Leaders outside of the classroom were managers of a system of learning. Many events of the last 50 years, however, have transformed the expectations for educational leaders to be instructional leaders.

School Reform

Many Americans feel that schools are not accomplishing the goals of educating students to be productive members of society and that schools are somewhat responsible for the numerous economic and social ills of society (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Often, each generation asserts that problems with public schools are unprecedented when challenges typically have remained static over time (Ravitch, 2000). The rush to solve these issues leads to a frenzy of debate and sometimes rash action without a clear understanding of the problem. Thus, the cycle is repeated and society finds itself with the same schools failing a new generation.

In order to do a better job of teaching students to think, it is critical to examine social reforms of the past 50 years. Times of crisis, events such as Sputnik seem to "trigger anxiety about the effectiveness of schools", but society should always have a sense of urgency to maximize teaching and learning for every child (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 44). In fact, in 1981 a journalist stated, "American Education is in a fearsome decline … schools have been expecting less and students have been learning less" (Mathews, 1981). Societies' urgency must be met with the deep desire not to repeat the same reforms and mistakes of the past, but to look ahead to the 21st century and imagine a system meeting the needs of American children.

A Wake up Call

Since the founding of America, it seems as if going to school was simply a rite of passage. Students were expected to attend and this was the end of the conversation. No one discussed whether students were actually learning anything or if teachers were actually teaching.

In the 1980's, the report, "A Nation at Risk", would set a new course in education for decades to come. The report began with a careful study of the educational system and the quality of its outcomes, our nation's students. Terrell Bell, Secretary of Education under President Reagan, adopted a blue ribbon committee to examine the US education system over a period of 3 years (Cuban, 1993). It was his belief that: "Schools aren't teaching enough and students aren't learning enough" and he began the research process with the National Commission on Excellence in Education (Cuban, 1993, p. 97). The "A Nation at Risk" report, released in 1983: "Sought to persuade the American public that

there was a real crisis in American education and that the solution to that educational crisis should become the major educational objective of the era" (Urban & Wagoner, 2009, p. 402). In one of the most striking statements, Bell proclaimed: "The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people" (Bell, 1983). The report talked about declining test scores in the United States in the areas of reading, mathematics, and science and the lessening of requirements for graduation and college admissions (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). One reason for this is that: "School curricula and textbooks had been dumbed down for the benefit of students who were not as capable as their predecessors or their global competitors" (Urban & Wagoner, 2009, p. 402). The report's language was harsh and was used to catch the attention of the country, despite many other global issues which continued to dominate the news of the day. Paul Copperman, one of the authors of the report, asserted: "For the first time in the history of our country, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents" (cited in Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 14). Once again, competition with other nations was a central issue as: "Faulty schooling was eroding the economy and that the remedy for both educational and economic decline was improving academic achievement" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 34). The writers of the report went so far as to use words that were perceived as inspired by the present fear from the Cold War by stating,

> If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to

> ourselves … We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinkable, unilateral educational disarmament. (A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform, 1983, p. 5)

"A Nation at Risk" provided a spark in the hopes of launching reform. Overall, the report firmly stated that: "Four aspects of school need to change – content, expectations, time, and teaching and that high school students should graduate with four years of English, three years of math, science, and social studies, a half a year of computer science, and college bound students should have at least two years of foreign language" (Ravitch, 2009, p. 414). The report also singled out teacher education programs that offered too many "educational methods" courses for pre-service teachers but nothing for the content to be taught (Urban & Wagoner, 2009).

Similar to reforms of the next century, "A Nation at Risk" did not propose differentiated education. Instead: "All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost" (Cuban, 1993, p. 412). "A Nation at Risk" was also successful in that: "The states promulgated more educational laws and regulations as a result of the report than they had generated in the previous twenty years" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 78). The report did not offer clear practical steps for reform, but other recommendations for reform did follow as: "The country was hungry for proven ways of boosting student achievement" (Finn, 2008, p. 41). One such report by Goldberg and Traiman, "What Works: Research about Teaching and Learning", issued straightforward lessons for parents and teachers to use such as: "Think through math problems before attempting them, staff should provide personal attention to students, monitor daily attendance, and

that children should draw and scribble stories at a young age" (cited in Finn, 2008, p. 41). A Nation at Risk also served to reinvent national assessment to focus the National Assessment of Educational Practice to sample student achievement at key transition grades of fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades, assess more subjects, and that achievement should be tallied and reported by states and cities as well as for the whole country (Finn, 2008). Another outcome of "A Nation at Risk" was a new focus on offering choice to parents and students in education. A new system of proposed vouchers, which did not succeed on Capitol Hill: "Caused many local schools to offer more choice programs such as magnet schools to replace forced busing and encourage competition to create quality schools" (Ravitch, 2000, p. 415). In many ways, "A Nation at Risk" set the stage for more intensive federal educational reforms in the coming decades by beginning to focus on student achievement and holding teachers and students to common standards, even though many states would be slow to adopt these practices.

There were many challenges with "A Nation at Risk", particularly among educators who saw the report as: "Public school bashing … educators knew that the schools were an easy target for state and local politicians looking for a scapegoat to blame for the economic decline plaguing much of the nation" (Urban & Wagoner, 2009, p. 403). "A Nation at Risk", following years of open schools, also endorsed the return to more teacher-centered instruction focusing on standards and the need for students to master certain objectives (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). The suggestions contained in the report did not reach the target audience of teachers as one researcher discovered when asking teachers about how recommendations of "A Nation at Risk" were implemented.

Roland Barth stated: “Despite all the trees and postage sacrificed to dissemination, it had little impact on its primary audience” (cited in Ravitch, 2000, p. 414). He also noted that many teachers simply do not keep up with current research in best practices (cited in Ravitch, 2000).

Regardless of the many challenges and the negative view of education in society, “A Nation at Risk”, for the first time in educational reform, seemed to grip the country and began decades of further debate. The response from “A Nation at Risk” seemed to reveal a: “Major fault line in education – those who believe that schools had little influence on children’s ability to learn and that schools have responsibility to educate ALL children regardless of circumstances” (Cuban, 1993, p. 415). This debate has continued to rage throughout both the 20th and 21st centuries.

Education for Some

In the decades following “A Nation at Risk”, standards were raised and education became more than just a state issue. However, were all students learning and prepared for their life pursuits? No longer was it permissible for teachers to simply “teach” and hope that student’s learned. It is now the expectation that all teachers reach every student.

Positive educational reform was still on the minds of many in Washington after the election of President George W. Bush in 2001. President Bush had support from a diverse cabinet including Roderick Paige, an African American who had been Superintendent of Schools in Houston, as his first Secretary of Education (Urban & Wagoner, 2009, p. 412). The Bush version of the Elementary and Secondary Education

Act, known as "No Child Left Behind" was passed by Congress in 2001 and signed into law on January 8, 2002 (Urban & Wagoner, 2009).

"No Child Left Behind" legislation: "Continued previous patterns of federal educational provision and funding, but also institutionalized standardized testing as the vehicle by which public schools would be measured" (Urban & Wagoner, 2009, p. 414). In addition, mandated testing was put in place for certain grade levels and courses and there were for schools who did not measure up including parents receiving outside tutoring for their child and even choosing another more successful school if the school's test grades did not improve over time (Urban & Wagoner, 2009).

"No Child Left Behind" created conditions for positive changes including: "Casting light upon the performance of schools, groups of children, districts, and states" (Finn, 2009, p. 245). In addition: "Many welcome the pressure on states to set and enforce academic standards and illuminate school results" (Finn, 2008, p. 245).

There has been a wealth of criticism from many groups and individuals following the "No Child Left Behind" legislation. Finn (2008) states: "In hindsight the law should have set uniform standards and measures for the nation, then freed states, districts, and schools to produce those results as they think best" (p. 239). Many believe that student growth should be a focus instead of arbitrary proficiency levels. Students must make continuous progress, yet are often deemed low-performing if they do not reach an arbitrary level. Most alarming is the: "Irresistible temptation for states to lower their standards or ease their passing scores" in order to meet proficiency benchmark standards (Finn, 2008, p. 240). In addition, education has always been a state program, but with

"No Child Left Behind", the federal government has placed itself in the position to dictate policy and provide or deny monetary support based on state and local implementation of those policies. However, some see: "Federal programs not to 'help' schools do more but to change what they do, often in ways they don't much want to be changed" (Finn, 2008, p. 240). With test scores on display and public opinions about schools, district and school administrators as well as teachers face tremendous pressure. In fact: "Teaching to the test may not only have negative consequences for the curriculum and pedagogy, but in its most extreme form can motivate some teachers to use past (and, illegally, present) test items as the basis for their instruction" (Urban & Wagoner, 2009, p. 414). If test scores do not grow, parents were given the opportunity to change schools. However: "Allowing individual students to enroll in higher-achieving schools, again most likely those with student bodies less burdened by poverty and its consequences, did nothing to alleviate the situation for the bulk of students and teachers and students in these failing schools, necessarily an issue of deep concern, was ignored completely" (Urban & Wagoner, 2009, p. 414). Many critics regard "No Child Left Behind" as policies that were not really designed to "help" schools or students. Similar to problems with "A Nation at Risk" in the 1980's, policymakers for "No Child Left Behind" were not always in tune with the bureaucracy and function of the schools. As much as urgent change was needed for the nation's schools, a process for sustainable change has not fully emerged.

In recent months, new information regarding increased flexibility for states has surfaced. Does this mean that some states can be exempt from educating all its students?

According to the Bringing Flexibility and Focus to Education Law (2011) released by the White House, there will be clear standards for states to receive waivers and exclude themselves from specific aspects of the law including the establishment of common curricular standards, state accountability programs, and support for both principals and teachers. Even with the end of "Adequate Yearly Progress", however, the "Federal government remains focused on test-based accountability for states, school districts, and schools" (Bringing Flexibility and Focus to Education Law, 2011).

How does the federal government continue its role of enacting policies in which states must comply if previous policies have not worked to improve schools? I believe we must have a narrower focus on individual districts and schools in order to respond to their specific needs. Gottfried, et al. (2011) studied many states working to improve schools since the law was enacted. Gottfried offered the following recommendation to the federal government as they work to improve schools,

> Given the diversity in educational practice and capacity at the state level, the federal government might wish to develop policies that meet states "where they are" by customizing capacity-building efforts and that take advantage of state variation to develop and test new solutions to the problem of low-performing schools. (p. 27)

Flexibility ensures that states and local school districts can consider what strategies will work best for individual schools and students. States and the federal government must occupy dual roles to ensure compliance to laws, but also understand the needs and barriers to progress for schools and their students. Strategic goal setting and needs

assessments for schools must be the priority for states and school districts with an authentic willingness to respond with meaningful support.

Even a decade after "No Child Left Behind" legislation was passed, the successes, challenges, and outcomes of major school reform efforts are still not fully realized. The increased role of the federal government in public school education and its regulation, however, is undeniable. Reform efforts have led to increased conflicting pressures for central offices to make radical and swift changes. There is tremendous pressure to comply with federal regulations in order to ensure federal financing of educational programs which often means time-consuming paperwork. There is also intense pressure to focus on and achieve higher instructional standards. External compliance vs. internal instructional focus often seems in direct conflict with each other.

Leadership for Student Learning

Due to the A Nation at Risk report and the No Child left Behind legislation, schools in the late 20th and early 21st century have undergone a dramatic and almost instantaneous transformation away from the status quo of previous decades. Educational leaders must equip, empower, and inspire their staff members to be about the business of educating children. No longer can administrators simply stand back and manage their staff. Indeed: "leaders in highly productive schools have a strong orientation to and affinity for the core technology of their business – learning and teaching" (Murphy, 2007, p. 183).

The influence of the instructional leader in a school is far reaching in shaping the ideals and vision of the entire district and school staffs. Decision making processes and

even facility needs must revolve around what is in the interest of students. Waters et al. (2003) found that the leader's knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment was a significant predictor of student performance. A school leader has the potential to help create a school environment that supports student learning while a superintendent and the local school board have the same power to create an entire community with the same focus. Every aspect of school and school system leadership must focus on the growth of students.

Instructional Leadership Defined

Instructional leadership and a careful exploration of what impacts student learning and achievement is a relatively new consideration. In the past and present, the perception and expectation was that school leaders were held responsible for student performance in the classroom. The school leader can ultimately be labeled as a success or failure depending on the performance of the school in the high stakes accountability system.

School leaders are expected to be instructional leaders within their buildings and thus observe daily classroom practices (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2010). In order for this to occur, school leaders must have knowledge of the activities taking place in the classroom through formal and informal observation protocols. Historically, these observations have had little to do with actual student learning. Indeed: "Many administrators spend a great deal of time making changes in the structure of the organization, but most of these changes do not result in higher student achievement" (Downey, 2004, p. 7). Instructional leaders in the new era spend their time in classrooms to observe the action of student learning because: "There is a need for a different

approach to observations for supervision purposes: a way to help a principal and a teacher collaborate to improve student performance"(p. 2-3)

In this new era of leadership for teaching and learning, central office staff also has a role to impact school and classroom level instruction. Thus, collaboration with teachers and facilitating opportunities in the schedule for teachers and other instructional leaders across schools to collaborate are critical components of instructional leadership.

I believe that high performing schools and districts have high performing, innovative leaders at all levels from the central office to school level principal. Murphy (2007) studied the integral work of leadership in regard to the effect on the instructional and curricular programs. He clearly demonstrated the strong correlation between the highly productive schools/districts and high performing principals/superintendents. He discovered that the successful leaders are attuned to the teaching and learning in their organization. At the district level, these leaders are well-informed and engaged in the instructional programs and they realize the importance to the devotion of their beliefs about the critical nature of the educational process in schools. Schlechty (2008), said that schools must become learning organizations where: "People continually expand their capacity to create the results they desire, where new expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together." Educational leaders also work to ensure that various programs are aligned in issue and purpose to create conditions for student learning to take place. Finally, instructional leaders ensure that teachers and students are self-reflective in

their teaching and learning in order to create institutions of thinking. How then might this compare to the work central office staff that supports instruction in school districts?

Central Office Leadership

The work of schools and school districts has always been about student achievement, but the teacher has typically been the only individual to bring this to fruition. However: "No Child Left Behind legislation has dramatically changed the administrative landscape of public schools" (Larson, 2007, p. 36). The actions and attitudes teachers continue to be important in the development of students, but there are many in leadership positions who affect instruction and student learning.

History of Central Office Leadership

School board members are given the authority from the state government to: "act as an agent of the state for school policy and operations" (Kirst, 2008, p. 38). In turn, school boards appoint a Superintendent who then appoints a variety of staff members and principals to lead. All are responsible for creating conditions for quality instruction in schools in order for student's to achieve. Initially, states gave control of schools to local boards in order to give citizens a greater opportunity to affect policy. Also, given local control, schools would better reflect the needs and culture of the community.

Central offices have not typically been in touch with the needs of the schools. Crow (2010) described many central offices as: "A bloated bureaucracies – where people could never get a response, where the central offices told the schools what they needed and did not find out what the schools needed from the central office" (p. 10). Education Resource Strategies (n.d.) suggest that: "While the private sector has increased efficiency

and effectiveness in the services such as procurement, transportation, accounting, and information technology, the education sector largely has been left behind" (p. 16). Thus, central offices have historically been out of touch with the needs of schools and lacking in critical services to schools.

Some have even questioned the need for school districts. Finn (1991) claimed that: "The school is the vital delivery system, the state is the policy setter (and chief paymaster), and nothing in between is very important." Others have stressed the importance of restructuring and downsizing central offices (Effron & Concannon, 1995; Hill, 1997). More recent researchers have, however, found that: "A principal and school staff could help a school improve student achievement through heroic effort, but they could not sustain the improvement without the support of the district and a commitment at that level to promote effective schooling practices" (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 28). Central offices have historically been focused on managing the school district. Education Resource Strategies (n.d.) note: "Central office leaders often are cast as the 'enforcers' – focused on compliance and accountability, but without the expertise or authority to work closely with schools to understand what they need and how the central office can best support those needs" (p. 16). With greater accountability and need for radical change, school districts must revolutionize their service which begins with an attitude shift from management to leadership.

The Superintendent and the Central Office

The superintendent is the core of the school district. This individual governs and leads at all levels of the district. The

> Primary reason for creating the position was to have a person work full-time supervising classroom instruction and assuring uniformity in the curriculum. The position of Superintendent was key in communicating the elements of the common curriculum and in providing the supervision to ensure its implementation (Andero, 2001, p. 277).

However, Andero (2001) describes the changing role of the superintendent and how there must be collaboration between the superintendents, school boards, and principals. The superintendent alone can't monitor classroom instruction. One Superintendent in Atlanta, GA stated,

> My role as superintendent is to make sure the things that stand in the way … are removed. So I met with principals in small groups and ask how are we supporting you? I ask what's working and what can we do better. My first year … you would have heard a lot about human resources issues and facilities issues and IT issues, today you may hear one or two concerns about a business area, but 96% of the conversation is about what we can do to get more students to exceed standards (p. 12-13).

Certainly, superintendents can no longer be the sole instructional leader in a district. In fact: "[Superintendents] have to surround themselves with very competent and talented people. You have to have a team that has bought into the vision that you articulate … and be leaders in their own right" (p. 16). As this superintendent stated, their role is to appoint and hire a dedicated central office team to ensure the central office responds to the needs

of schools and so schools can remain focused on instruction by removing barriers that stand in their way.

It is significant to note that superintendents, in fact, remain in their position for a limited time. Corcoran et al. (2001) stated that in three districts studied,

> Within four years of launching reforms, the superintendents who had led the design of the initiatives left under pressure from their boards and local political leaders. In two cases, they were pushed out even though their initiatives had produced significant growth in student achievement (p. 81).

Despite their work that clearly impacted instruction and students, each of these individuals: "Offended political leaders or interest groups" (p 81). Therefore the work of the central office must be more than just the vision of one person. In fact: "No single person has all the knowledge, skills, and talent to lead a district, improve a school, or meet all the needs of every child in his or her classroom. It will take a collaborative effort and widely dispersed leadership to meet the challenges confronting our schools" (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 2). The notion of a fully collaborative partnership between the districts and its schools is a relatively new notion considering that some called for the abolishment of school districts in the early nineties (Finn, 2001). Indeed, every position, from the superintendent to individual support roles: "Must be evaluated for its contribution to improving school and classroom practices, graduation rates, and students' preparation for college and careers" (p. 20). The superintendent must ensure the central office team is equipped and ready to meet the needs of schools.

The Purpose of Central Office Staff

While the Superintendent is not the sole leader, the district leadership does establish the "common work of schools within the district" and serves as the "glue holding the district together" (Marzano & Waters, 2011, p. 90). DuFour and Marzano (2011) state: "The superintendent expects building principals to accept responsibility for the success of their schools and provides principals with some flexibility, but principals are also expected to lead within the boundaries established by the district's goals" (p. 30). Similarly: "Though principals must be accountable to districts for their performance, districts too must be accountable to their principals; in other words, they must determine what tools and supports their principals need to be effective and find ways to provide principals with those supports" (Miller, 2006, p. 13). Superintendents also ensure that: "Building-administrators throughout the district are heavily involved in the goal-setting process since there are individuals who, for all practical purposes, will implement articulated goals in schools" (p. 11). Central offices work to support schools in their mission and provide the resources needed to carry out the task before them.

Since the role of the superintendent has become highly complex, others in central office have taken on the role of instructional leader. Indeed, instructional leadership must be a main focus of central services and often this is fulfilled through quality staffing and decision making for the benefit of all schools. This is still a new concept, however, as most districts have long focused on managing the business of schools. Honig (2010) examined the practices of districts around the country who embraced "central office transformation" for improved support of instruction. These districts implemented

reforms, “Aimed to increase the efficiency with which the central office provides basic services to schools” (p. iii). Rather than central office personnel talking about teaching and learning, districts with a central focus on teaching and learning: “Demonstrate how their work matters in concrete terms to teaching and learning … and act to actually change their work to leverage specific supports for teaching and learning improvement” (Honig, 2010, p. iii). These supports for teaching and learning are best when implemented in person. The Southern Regional Education Board (2009) noted that: “Strong central office support of improvement structures fosters school-level implementation. It is imperative that central office staff voice agreement with structures, expect schools to implement them, and know that good implementation looks like. They should strive to observe implementation in action. (p. 20)” Thus, these leaders know the work of the district and witness it first hand in order to realize the districts goals. These district transformational leaders: “Recognize that improving teaching and learning across a district is a systems problem, demanding engagement of people throughout schools and central offices in coordinated efforts to realize ambitious teaching and learning improvement goals for all students” (Honig, 2010, p. 2). Transformational central office leadership is largely contingent on how people are organized and how they work with schools to meet student’s needs.

Central office cannot hope to be transformational without a strong partnership with its schools. Crow (2010) noted: “We must ‘flip the script’ – that means our central office serves the schools, rather than vice versa. We have to provide services to schools in a timely manner that will allow schools to get on with teaching and learning. They

can't be worried about meeting the needs of a central bureaucracy" (p. 10). Sofo (2008) details a transformative middle school which improved test scores through powerful relationships between students and staff and rethinking how striving students are supported in differentiating instruction. This transformation for greater student achievement is possible when central office administrators: "Help facilitate those connections by ensuring that they actively listen to and connect with teachers and principals. This active listening needs to be characterized by treating staff as equal partners rather than subordinates" (Sofo, 2008, p. 408).

Hillman and Kucher (2010) state that: "Central offices should develop partnerships for collaboration between the central office and schools that reflect movement from a 'working on' to a 'working with' mentality" (p. 22). This is only possible when central office leaders are present in the schools and in touch with the needs of principals and teachers. Agullard and Goughour (2006) assert: "The most-improved schools were more likely to report receiving frequent visits from district staff than were the least-improved schools" (p. 23). Bottoms (2008) advocates: "Keeping the central office small to encourage staff members to work more closely together … the only way the central office staff could meet their goals was in collaboration with principals and teachers in the schools" (p. 20). This collaboration allows leaders to: "Explore ways to build the capacity of school staff at the local level to determine individual professional development needs and designs so as not to do 'it' to them, but rather 'with' them" (Hillman & Kucher, 2010, p. 22). The significance of the district and school partnership cannot be overlooked.

In an era of Professional Learning Communities among teachers, central office leaders must set the example as promoting learning communities across schools in order to: "Identify, recognize, and promote those schools where professional learning was producing success in terms of student achievement to share their best practices with other schools" (Hillman & Kucher, 2010, p. 22). Zippin (2010) described the work of district based professional development as,

> Led by content experts from departments such as curriculum and instruction, exceptional student education, English for speakers of other languages, and career, technical, adult, and community education. The professional development support department serves as consultant and advisor to these content experts to ensure that the professional development they provide is aligned to policy and national and state standards (p. 43).

Rather than simply sharing ideas and having occasional celebrations, central office leaders must advance to the next level and ensure that other schools adopt the same standards and that professional development and learning align with district and state goals so that all schools are successful.

In many ways, however, this seems counter to the current practices where central office instructional leaders spend a majority of their time only in low-performing schools. Agullard and Goughour (2006) note: "Districts provide the right resources to support school improvement, but not in adequate quantities" (p. 42). All schools have certain human resource and budgetary needs, but must ensure equitable distribution of resources. In addition, Honig (2010) repeatedly states that there is a profound need for central offices to partner with schools not based on managing problems as they arise, but to

anticipate and address needs immediately. Districts are allocating all the resources to highly impacted schools, yet many schools need support so that additional problems of low student achievement do not arise. All schools must be included so that best practices can be learned, adjusted according to need, and then replicated across schools to meet the needs of students.

Strategic Central Office Leadership for Quality Instruction

Central office personnel must be strategically placed in positions to directly influence schools and student achievement. Crow (2010) suggested,

> We need to reorganize the central office to transform it into a 'service-driven operating unit' that empowers the principals and the schools, that releases them to focus on the core business of teaching and learning. So we divided our system into what we call school reform teams, which are not simply area offices. … They have an executive director, equivalent to an associate superintendent or assistant superintendent who is responsible for a group of schools. They're supposed to remove barriers by linking principals to facilities, human resources, transportation, child nutrition, and other critical support services that help the schools run efficiently. (p. 11-12)

In this model, school reform teams in this district knew a great deal about the needs of their schools and were able to provide direct service. Each of these teams: "Assumed a support role to schools, with the specific task of engaging in mentoring, coaching, and advocacy around the process of encouraging powerful teaching and learning" (Glaser & Toscano, 2008, p. 14). Education Resource Strategies (n.d.) also discussed a similar model where,

> The district reorganized central office into cross-functional teams serving networks of about 15 schools each. These teams included an academic

> lead, special education staff, operations, and human resource support, a budget expert, and a social worker. Together the teams supported the principal in creating his or her school improvement plan and aligning resources and support to achieve it. These teams shared accountability for improving student performance and their level of service was monitored through a combination of 'customer' surveys administered to school principals and process metrics measuring the speed and quality of service. The district is currently revising its information and accountability systems to align to this new approach. (p. 17)

Collaborating as teams across the central office can serve to streamline the support for schools and principals. In addition, these models organize and prioritize the needs of schools so that everyone can spend more time focusing on instruction. These models should be scrutinized closely and compared with how central offices are managed and directed to meet the needs of today's schools.

Similarly, the staffing practices of central offices should also be examined as to how they invest in personnel to support learning. Plecki (2010) establishes the priority of: "Redirecting staffing resources to positions, team structures, and other arrangements that increase instructional leadership activity inside or across schools. Strategic personnel placement focuses on both the supply of people able to exercise instructional leadership and their capacity to do so" (p. v). Burbach (2010) argues that in addition to a: "Well-coordinated administrative team, a strong case can be made for broadening the team of professional educators to include specialists in reading, mathematics, technology, testing and any other area of specialization that promises to enhance the learning potential of this group of children" (Burbach, 2010, p. 5). Thus, districts must equitably distribute resources based on the needs of schools (Plecki, 2010).

There is nothing more important to high student achievement at the district level than: “Cultivating a supply of staff relevant to the learning improvement agenda by creating new institutional leadership and support positions” (Plecki, 2010, p. 10). Districts with high student achievement have found new ways to transform personnel leadership. These districts have: “Put in place a significantly robust and coherent cadre of staff who offer instructional leadership to teachers far beyond what can be managed by school principals, who are traditionally seen and expected to work as instructional leaders in their buildings” (Plecki, 2010, p. 91). As districts and schools work together to support high student achievement, personnel must be placed strategically to provide instructional leadership for teaching and learning.

Central office instructional personnel also serve to keep a strong focus on curriculum, instruction, and student learning. Various studies have shown that: “Schools and their teachers need the district central office to help them articulate and interpret state frameworks and/or student performance standards and to help teachers know what to do in the classroom so that students will be able to meet those standards” (Foley, 2010, p.11). As we look at a strong district as the example, Snipes, Doolittle, and Herlihy (2002) identified three districts which showed consistent student gains and concluded that each provided standards, instructional framework, and intensive professional development for teachers and principals to develop “instructional coherence.” This type of coherence can only come from deliberate engagement from central office to schools, principals, and teachers. Toll illuminated this idea: “While an instructional leader pays

attention to the planning, implementation, and evaluation of instruction, a learning leader focuses on what is learned and how it is learned" (p. 51).

Though the research is strong in suggesting that wise decision making about personnel is critical in transforming districts for student learning (Plecki, 2010; Sofo, 2008; Honig, 2010), very little research is centered on what kinds of personnel positions are needed and their roles and responsibilities. While it is true that districts and schools are different and have individual needs, research is needed to make suggestions as to what district positions can be beneficial to improve student achievement at the school level. In addition, the practices of these individuals must be examined to explore how they are linked to increased student achievement.

Defined Autonomy and the Central Office

In many large districts, superintendents often have the assistance of assistant superintendents and other administrative staff members who work together to carry out the mission of the district. Often, these individuals engage in: "Planning, goal adoption, board alignment and support, resource alignment, and monitoring primarily through the district off staff" (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 9). How does a superintendent ensure all of these staff members as well as principals and other school based staff are working in harmony? Marzano & Waters (2009) refer to the importance of: "Defined autonomy when the Superintendent expects building principals and other administrators in the district to lead within the boundaries defined by the district goals" (p. 8).

It is important to consider what defined autonomy looks like in a school district. A critical component of this organizational autonomy is the idea of professional learning communities at both the central office and school levels. Indeed,

> Central offices can advance when they have strong professional learning communities. … Alignment and coherence of purpose and work are important factors in helping school districts progress. Central office employees tend to work in silos, based on their department or function. Very often, departments in central offices are working on different aspects of the same problem, but they don't come together to align their work or to realize solutions to problems. Often, they result in duplication of efforts, inefficient use of time and people resources, and a lack of alignment and coherence in the work of the district. Professional learning communities at the central office level can provide stronger leadership and support for the work that must be done by school leaders and teachers in the district's schools. (p. 69)

In order for there to be autonomy across central office staff members, the superintendent must be very clear about their purpose and allow departments to see their own interconnectedness to realize a professional learning community.

Defined autonomy is critical to the shared vision and implementation of policy and practice in a school district. A study of high-performing school systems around the world concluded that: "The first step effective leaders took to improve their systems was to clarify what was non-negotiable – leaders were willing to compromise in many specific aspects of system wide improvement, they were vigilant in ensuring there was little or no compromise in the execution of the non-negotiables" (Mourshed et al., 2010, p. 110). These effective districts were characterized by: "Educators who enjoyed some latitude within specific parameters and the unique context of an individual school was recognized" (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 30). For example, "While the district calls for

the development of high-performing collaborative teams in every school, there are a variety of ways schools could organize teachers into teams – by course, by grade level, by department, interdisciplinary, vertically, partnered with other schools, or electronically" (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 30).

In districts that are struggling with student achievement, autonomy looks very different at the school level. In these schools: "Leadership enforced the norms of privatism and conservatism … For example, a social studies chair saw department meetings as an irritating ritual rather than an opportunity – Supports or incentives for learning were few in the social studies department" (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001, p. 107-108). The absence of principal leadership in these schools: "Is a strong frame for the weak teacher community across departments in the school" (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001, p. 107-108). In stark contrast to defined autonomy, Walker (1987) asserts that central office staff may have once resembled the "blob" when they are unable or unwilling to support each school's defined autonomy. Autonomy becomes isolationism in these schools and success is never fully realized.

Defined autonomy encourages: "Good leaders to foster good leadership at other levels" (Fullan, 2001, p. 10). Within the boundaries of the non-negotiables as set by the superintendent, defined autonomy allows for the: "Mobilization of the collective capacity to challenge difficult circumstances and lead in a culture of change" (Fullan, 2001, p. 136-137). It is essential to determine the non-negotiables for instruction and then to allow schools to make it work for their students.

Mid-Level Content Leadership for Instruction

Many districts have created "mid-level" positions which may focus on directing a content area for districts. Some may even focus their efforts, in partnerships with principals, at certain schools based on school data and need. However: "Some districts have adopted a hands-off approach toward schools in the name of empowerment, such an approach ultimately thwarts sustained improvement efforts because district leaders must perform a number of critical tasks" (Sparks, 2002, p. 44). Thus, these mid-level content leadership positions can be critical to provide direct instructional support to schools

Many schools utilize academic coaches or facilitators who are based in schools but who work closely with both principals and district leaders to focus on instruction and promote greater student achievement. For example, in one school district,

> The coordinator for English learner services trained [all other central office staff] in that zone on the critical components of a highly effective English learner lesson and organized field trips to model classrooms. While serving as learning support partners to four schools, she is also available to any district school to support its English learner program. (p. 16)

These individuals: "Emerge as pivotal actors in the two-way translation and communication between top district leadership and school-level staff around instructional initiatives" (Burch & Spillane, 2004, p. 1). Indeed, these individuals have the task of: "Translating big ideas like improving literacy or closing the achievement gap into strategies, guidelines, and procedures that are handed down by schools" (Burch & Spillane, 2004, p. 1). Researchers have stressed that these individuals occupy a: "Strategic position in between the innovations unfolding inside the schools, within and

across different schools, and beyond. We call this work brokering" (Burch & Spillane, 2004, p. 1). Thus, it is essential that mid-level staff understand the mission and are able to translate this important work into specific strategies for implementation in teacher classrooms.

It is critical that these mid-level central office staff members approach their work as collaborative around the needs of schools. After working with numerous mid-level district staff, Burch and Spillane (2004) state,

> The majority of mid-level central office staff brought an authoritative orientation to their interactions with schools. We argue that the predominance of an authoritative orientation in district/school interactions is problematic and undercuts district efforts to improve instruction. Far fewer individuals have a collaborative orientation to brokering (p. 2).

Rather, these staff members should: "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" (von Frank, 2010, p. 38). Thus, districts must ensure structured methods to ensure mid-level leaders are the right fit for their important work. Mid-level leaders must support and facilitate instructional leadership rather than focus on compliance and issuing directives from the district.

Thus, it is critical that mid-level leaders spend a large majority of their time observing and modeling in the classrooms as well as leading professional development for teachers. Indeed: "Successful coaches at the school and district levels combine instructional expertise with knowledge about school wide and district wide strategies.

The small and big picture emerge for these coaches. They're equally comfortable on the dance floor and in the balcony" (Fullan & Knight, 2011, p. 50).

The Central Office and the School Principal

The central office connection with the school principal is a vital link to school and instructional improvement. Certainly there is a: "Shortage of certified principals willing to step into leadership positions" (Miller, 2004, p. 12). Thus: "It is important for districts to implement policies and practices to support principals" since their work is complex and challenging (Miller, 2004, p. 12). However, many principals describe the reality of their work as: "We spend too much time on operations, administrative tasks, responding to emails, not instructional matters" (Crow, 2010, p. 10). Principals are to monitor the instructional program in schools and often depend on some level of support from the district. Agullard and Goughour (2006) note that: "Regardless of district size, principals of the most-improved schools were more likely to describe a loose level of district control over school-improvement decisions, while principals of the least improved schools were more likely to describe tight district control" (p. 24). Autonomy at the school level is important so that principals can lead and direct their school, but the impact of the central office, however great or small, cannot be overlooked. Central office plays an important role to recruit and retain principals while making sure principals are placed in the best positions based on their abilities.

The relationship between the central office and principals has evolved in large part to the No Child Left Behind legislation. There are multiple tensions as work since,

> For the central office staff, the center of gravity is externally focused and means attending to the priorities and needs of school board members whose purview is the operation of the entire school district. In contrast, the center of gravity for building-level administrators is internally focused and begins with the arrival of students each school day. For principal and assistant principals, the focus of their energies is ensuring the safety and welfare of all students and staff, promoting and maintaining high expectations for academic achievement for all students, and ensuring the effective day-to-day operation of the building. (Larson, 2007, p. 37).

It would seem that a common vision is needed so that board members, the school district, principals, and school based staff are working in unison to achieve their goals. There is nothing wrong with energies of these stakeholder groups being focused in different ways yet still traveling towards high quality instruction and achievement for all students.

Central office impacts principals in many ways. First and foremost, principals participate in many central office meetings. Larson (2007) states that these meetings may not, however, provide benefits to principals and their schools. He described this meeting in this way: "We travel to the central office to attend a monthly meeting where district-level administrators have put together a lengthy agenda of informational items. Little attention is usually paid to discussing how to go about improving teaching and learning back at our buildings" (Larson, 2007, p. 36). These meetings would seem to be infrequent and full of "informational"

items, yet: “Building-level administrators have little time to coordinate their work with that of central-office colleagues” (Larson, 2007, p. 38). Central offices must consider their time with principals to ensure meetings are meaningful and filled with ideas and strategies that can be taken back to the school setting. Ultimately: “The district’s role is to create an infrastructure that allows principals access to the data they need to effectively monitor and evaluate curriculum, instruction, and assessment” (Miller, 2004, p. 14). Central offices have an important role in the work of the principal since: “Given that the individual school is held accountable for the performance of its students, the most dramatic impact of NCLB on the culture of school governance may well be the shift in the relationship between the central-office and site administrators from that of command and control to support and service” (Larson, 2007, p. 38). From the perspective of the school principal: “Site administrators enjoy knowing that someone at the district office is a partner who understands their school’s unique needs and is readily available when a problem arises. Regular site visits keep district administrators keenly aware of current issues in the field” (Glaser, 2008, p. 17). The central office staff can have a powerful relationship with schools to meet their needs and partner with them to realize their goals.

Connection between Central Office Personnel and Student Achievement

Districts have a role in creating positive and support conditions for quality instruction. Ultimately,

> Districts cannot hold principals accountable for improved student results if they fail to provide necessary resources, to give them the authority to select staff and remove unproductive staff, and provide technical assistance, professional development and coaching to address problems and implement proven practices. Rather, they must establish "reciprocal accountability," holding principals accountable, but also holding themselves accountable for providing support. (Bottoms, 2010, p. 21)

Based on a thorough review of the literature surrounding central office transformational leadership and support for instruction and learning, MacIver and Farley (2003) highlight that a district culture must focus on improving student achievement as the priority of every individual, a focus on instruction with high level of resources designed for professional development, focused attention on analysis and alignment of curriculum, and professional development for principals and teachers. Collective leadership from all individuals is key as there is a: "Significant association between collective leadership and high student performance in schools" (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008, p. 554). For the highest quality instruction and student achievement to occur daily in classrooms, leaders are needed who depend on the collective leadership of others to help create conditions that support learning.

Central office staff members and school districts typically spend considerable time working on the structure of the organization. Yet: "How central office staff members organize their time and work to support principals' work and instruction is more important than how the district office is organized" (Bottoms, 2010, p. 19). Everyone must be focused on the important work of improving instruction, but often there are many in central services that are not focused on instruction and student achievement. Bottoms (2010) found that these individuals were out-of-touch with district needs, "As their focus

was on budgets and building maintenance, and their interviews did not reveal a clear connection between their work and the business of creating effective teaching and learning" (p. 19). School districts cannot hope to be transformational for teaching and learning without complete collaboration form all areas.

In the age of accountability, schools are held accountable by all its stakeholders for the quality of students it produces. This quality is judged by how critically and creatively students think which is a direct result of instruction. All educational leaders must be able to remain focused on this important work. Central office staff members can be instrumental in creating a culture where: "Educators learn from and with each other, introducing ideas, sharing practices, and making decisions that benefit the students that pass through the doors each day" (Hillman & Kachur, 2010, p. 22). Leadership from the central office is critical to: "Raising student achievement and in terms of creating the conditions for adult learning that lead to higher levels of student achievement" (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 46). In conclusion: "When student learning is a school system's priority, then the central office and schools will partner to achieve that result" (Mizell, 2010, p. 47). The work of increased student achievement is too great a task for schools or the central office to accomplish alone.

The current study about the role of the central office in the support of high quality instruction was informed by the need to aid schools and teachers in leading students to their maximum potential. Through interviews of central office staff, the study explored the environment in which the central office operated to support schools in implementing

instruction to its students. Thus, this study sought to examine the methods of individuals at the central office level to support schools in improving instruction.

CHAPTER III

OUTLINE OF PROCEDURES

Research Tradition

The qualitative data generated in this study will define the process of identifying how central office supports instruction and student achievement in schools. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this study as it is a direct reflection of my own thinking as I have moved through various positions over the last 12 years. I am curious about how my work and the work of the central office level impacts the practices of teachers and am using multiple interviews to capture the direct reflections and insights of those working at the central office level.

Qualitative study is the most appropriate for this research because a variety of individuals in a district will be interviewed to determine the practices of support for instruction. From these different individuals in a variety of positions, I will consider how the collective district supports high quality instruction. These practices will then be compared to other research findings in order to make a comparison and perhaps to even offer suggestions for deeper support of instruction and student achievement.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

- What role does central office staff perceive themselves playing in supporting high quality curriculum and instruction?
    - How does a contemporary central office function to support instruction?
    - How could a central office adapt to best support quality instruction?

Key Concepts and Terms

Four important terms needed to be defined for this study. "Instruction" will be defined as the strategies and materials teachers select to deliver lessons to students. "Curriculum" will be defined as the standards and content taught to students. During this study, the state began the process of transitioning from the Standard Course of Study to the Common Core and Essential Standards. This is significant to note as many Curriculum Directors were developing units with classroom teachers for implementation throughout the district. "Student achievement" will be identified by positive student growth and increased performance on both standardized and formative assessments. The state has End of Grade tests for Grades 3-8 and End of Course tests for 10 high school courses. Finally, "instructional support" is any activity, program, or planning by staff members which can be linked to instruction delivered to students by teachers. Central office staff members must complete many tasks to allow the school district to function so that the work of teaching can occur, but "direct instructional support" will be only applied to tasks that are discussed or referenced in the context of instruction. For

example, professional development, without a focus on instruction and learning, will not be classified as instructional support while curriculum mapping, with the purpose of increased fidelity of implementation, would be classified as instructional support.

Setting

The setting for this study is a large urban school district in the southeastern United States. There are 33,000 students in the district with 54 schools. Students in the district are 51% African American, 21% Caucasian, 23% Hispanic, and 5% other. There are 2,300 teachers in the district with 4,600 total employees.

This setting was selected due to the proximity of the researcher at the time. In addition, this setting was selected because there were many schools over time that were labeled "at risk" by the state with less than 50% of students performing at grade level. In contrast, there were many schools that were doing very well on state testing so this led me to question more about how the central office supported this mixture of schools with different needs.

Participants

All individuals interviewed were Directors or Executive Directors over various aspects of the district. I began by choosing individuals to interview based on their level of involvement with individuals in schools, whether those are principals, instructional facilitators, or teachers. Those in the higher levels of leadership do work directly with schools at times, but mostly depend on insights from Directors and Executive Directors linked to schools. For example, most Area Superintendents work with principal, assistant principals, and instructional facilitators but rarely work directly with teachers. However,

some positions such as the ESL Director or Director of Advanced Academics work directly at times with teachers.

I generated a list of all Directors and Executive Directors in the district which included about 50 individuals. I began by prioritizing those individuals who, based on their job title, may have direct involvement with schools. This included about 20 individuals. I then sent out emails to these staff members and about 20 other individuals in the district to request a time to interview them and shared information about my study. About 18 people did not respond, while 7 people replied and stated they had too much to do to meet with me. In the end, I met with 22 individuals (Table 1). Nineteen of the individuals were female and 3 were male. I did not collect data about the race and ethnicity of participants for this study. Six of the individuals were in roles such as transportation director or student assignment which did not have direct connections with schools. The remaining 16 central office staff members were in what could be considered roles with direct connections to schools and instruction. In addition, each of these positions works with other directors, but also reported to the Chief of Staff, Area Superintendents over Elementary, Middle, and High Schools, and the Superintendent. Senior staff members, such as area and assistant superintendents, are not included in this study as the goal of the design is to focus on those who are directly involved with supporting schools on a day to day basis.

Table 1. Central Office Staff Members Interviewed

Roles Directly Related to Instruction	Roles Not Directly Related to Instruction
Special Education Director	Director of Transportation
Director of Advanced Academics	Director of Security
Director of Science (K-12)	Public Relations Officer
Director of Social Studies (6-12) and Foreign Languages (K-12)	Chief Financial Officer
Director of Media and Technology	Director of Student Assignment
Executive Director of Program and Project Accountability	Director of Student Support Services
Area Instructional Facilitators for Elementary, Middle, and High Schools (3 positions)	
Professional Growth and Development Specialist	
Curriculum Specialist for English (9-12)	
Director of Elementary Mathematics	
Director of Assessment for Learning	
English as a Second Language Director	
Executive Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment	

Human Resources Specialist for Talent Development	

Data Collection

Data were collected through 22 interviews with the Executive Directors and Directors in the district. Interviews were conducted using the same interview protocol for all individuals (Appendix A). Interview questions were developed to question the interviewee about their responsibilities and how they collaborated with others in their role. Specific questions about their relationship to classroom instruction were developed to determine their level of direct involvement with instruction. For those in roles not directly related to instruction, the questions were still asked for consistency and also to measure their understanding of how their work related in some way to classroom instruction. For example, some in the district work directly with instructional facilitators at the school level by presenting professional development that the instructional facilitators will provide to school staff. The work of those at the district level would have a direct impact in this example with teachers and their students. In addition, the work of a community education director may be indirectly related to instruction since they work to ensure before and after school programs. However, an individual in this role might make a strong connection between the relationship of quality before and after school with a nurturing environment for students to be safe and to have dedicated time to homework and tutoring. In this way, an individual in an indirect support role for instruction may make their work more related to instruction. The last two questions during each interview

were asked to determine what constraints existed to their work as well as a chance for the interviewee to share any recommendations they would offer to better support the work of instruction in schools.

Interviews occurred at various central office district locations. Three interviews occurred at a school. Each individual was interviewed one time and interviews took 30 minutes to an hour. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed for a total of approximately 300 single spaced pages. Once transcribed, the data for questions were grouped together. Initially, all activities were documented and grouped into categories of those in roles not directly related to instruction and those in roles more directly related to instruction in order to examine the full scope of the work of the district central office.

I examined the responsibilities, constraints, and support structures for various central office staff using the specific questions related to those topics. I read through each interview carefully and highlighted key phrases regarding specific tasks or collaboration in meetings which may have related to instruction. I made notes in the margins as I began to document very broad categories. I gathered all 22 responses to the question about how they were an instructional leader and how their position related to instruction. I did the same thing for the question about the reality of their role versus what it could be and any general recommendations they could offer for central office to be more focused on instruction. I was able to see how individuals connected their work to instruction and then make comparisons across all interviews because responses were on the same few pages.

This greatly assisted with creating comparisons and broad categories as I began to notice various issues.

Following this analysis, each category was examined more closely and studied for how individuals discussed their roles in terms of how they impacted instruction. I then looked for similarities and differences between how individuals in roles that indirectly support instruction versus those that directly support instruction discussed their roles in relationship with instruction. I also noted various constraints that were identified to the work of supporting instruction.

Subjectivity

I acknowledge my own subjectivity in relationship to who am I as a researcher. I am a parent and view practices and decisions with the critical eye of what I would want for my own children. In addition, I am a white male in an increasingly diverse community and I want to always look upon practices and decisions to ensure that the needs of all students are being met. I am a former elementary teacher, full-time mentor to new teachers, assistant principal at the middle school level, and currently a principal at the elementary level. As a teacher, I interacted frequently with central office instructional support staff in trainings and serving as an individual who wrote curriculum and assessments. I also spent three years mentoring new teachers in four different high needs schools. During this time, I was considered an arm of the central office while based in a school so my ideas about central office support are grounded in the eyes of new teachers beginning to engage in the teaching field. As an administrator, I interact frequently with central office instructional staff members, particularly through the central office

instructional facilitator housed in my school. In my professional roles I continuously think about the balance between district and state policies and accountability with the need to show a high level of compassion and caring for each student.

As I reflect upon myself and consider the research design of this project, I entered into this study with a set of biases. I have not had central office experience and I fully acknowledge that I cannot fully understand the total scope of central office work demands. Thus, I must not infer an act is bad practice on the part of the central office staff member because I will not have comprehensive understanding of their roles. A number of individuals may provide a variation of responses which I must hear in detail to see where they fit with the wider purpose and perspective.

It is important to consider my own background and experiences to further explore subjectivity. I was raised by both of my parents and education was always a priority, even though many of my family members had not attended college. I loved school and specifically the sciences. I began volunteering and working at a science museum while I was in middle school and interacted with visitors and shared informal science experiences. It was from this experience that I knew I wanted to be in education. After attending college, I taught third grade for 6 years. As a third grade teacher in my four year of teaching, I was awarded the title of Teacher of the Year for my school district and began to interact with many individuals at the central office level. I was even involved as an assessment writer for the district's local assessments and served on many teams where I had an opportunity to speak with new teachers, train other teachers in science content, and create science kits.

Shortly after becoming the district Teacher of the Year, a new program was developed and I became a full-time mentor in four different schools. I was responsible for all aspects of support for teachers in their first, second, and third years. I met with these teachers, observed in their classrooms, provided feedback, and led professional development. As a mentor, I worked with other mentors in other schools to share best practices and coordinate mentoring based on needs for a variety of teachers at the K-5 level. Our network of mentors was a strong collaborative group who took time to develop our mentoring skills and reflected often on our work. It was through this experience that I wondered how all aspects of central office leadership could work towards a more collaborative culture. As a mentor, I often saw the need for more coordinated efforts to support new and veteran teachers at the school level. I also worked closely with school based staff and administration to help support the needs of beginning teachers. In some of my schools, administrators saw the needs of new teachers as a priority while others did not. For example, some administrators met with me often to gain knowledge about how to best support these teachers while other administrators did not know my name. This experience is what led me to pursue administration and begin further graduate studies because I saw the vital importance of the school based administrator to support teachers who then in turn supported students.

I had the opportunity to move out of the elementary school level to become an administrator in middle school. I no longer had any familiar contacts at the district level and began to learn about middle school curriculum and instructional practices. This period of time included a change in the Superintendent and many in central office roles

retired or moved away. It was difficult to know exactly who was supporting the work of schools especially in terms of content and instruction which caused me to further consider the role of the central office in the support of instruction at the school level. I also experienced a very large school with multiple administrators and found it difficult to prioritize my time to focus on instruction. In addition, our instructional facilitator was new in her role and struggled at times to understand her role. The school was considered a good school in terms of community support and average to high average test scores, there were other administrative changes at the school and the number of students and teachers led to a lack of coordination for instructional support at times.

I also acknowledge that I am a young principal as another aspect of subjectivity. I have been awarded the district "Teacher of the Year" title, graduated from two master's programs, and am completing my doctorate before the age of 35. As a young principal, I acknowledge that some participants in my research study perceived me as disconnected to the work of the central office level since I have no experience working at that level. However, one advantage of being a young principal is having more current information about best practices through my coursework and a greater affinity for technology to support instruction.

Towards the end of this study, I became a principal in another school district. I am aware that I had my own perceptions of how central office worked to support instruction. It seemed to me that at times that some departments did not always communicate with each other and there was a pattern of high turnover among central office staff members. I did not allow these opinions to impact my data collection and entered into each

conversation with a true sense of inquiry and investigation. It was not difficult to keep my own opinions out of the data as I reviewed the transcriptions and grouped items into categories. I read through interviews and used only the information given to group the phrases and statements into categories. I do acknowledge that while I grouped certain items one way, another researcher could have grouped them into another way.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is another important component of this study to consider. It is important that: "The processes of the research are carried out fairly, that the products represent as closely as possible the experiences of the people who are studied" (Ely et al., 1991, p. 93). It would be helpful to corroborate more of my research using multiple data collection methods, but I did interview 22 individuals to ensure a large sample size. Member checking also occurred by allowing participants the opportunity to read their responses and to examine data after analysis to ensure accuracy. A description of the interviews is located in the results section of the paper utilizing direct quotes from participants. All transcriptions of interviews and data analysis manuscripts will be kept in a secure location for at least 3 years following the research project.

Benefits and Risks

Participants will benefit from this study because they will be able to critically reflect on their own practice as well as their beliefs and curriculum and instruction and how they support student achievement. School districts may also benefit from this study based on additional strategies and procedures to provide increased instructional support.

Risks were certainly a factor in this study. One of the concerns was that the researcher worked in the school district being studied. However, this was no longer the case by the end of the research study. Confidentiality was ensured to individuals being interviewed and the actual names of the district and those interviewed were changed so that no one was identifiable. However, some departments within the district are small so it might be possible to identify some individuals based on their role and responsibilities. All recordings and transcripts were kept confidential and destroyed at the conclusion of the research study.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include that interviews were the primary source of data collection. Additionally, while people may talk about supporting instruction and achievement, their actions may not truly reflect their statements. Observations would have been a beneficial way of understanding the actions of individuals, but this form of data collection was logistically not possible for me.

Another limitation of this study includes the participants. Executive Directors and Directors highlighted the work of those who are most directly involved with schools and those who support instruction. However, the impact of the school level staff as well as of those in Assistant Superintendent roles are no less important. In addition, the work of the Superintendent and the individual school board was also important to the creation and implementation of curriculum policies and programs but was not discussed in this body of work. Ideally, this work would have included the perspectives of principals, instructional facilitators, and perhaps even teachers themselves to draw further

comparisons between the work of those in central office positions and how those at the school level perceive their work and its impact on instruction.

Another limitation of this study includes the fact that 9 of the individuals interviewed were very new to their role. All of these 9 individuals worked in positions in direct support of instruction and could have an impact on the depth of their knowledge about supporting schools in instruction. In addition, almost half of these individuals were in a role at the central office level for the first time.

While this study does examine the work of the central office in one district in depth, generalizations to a wider community of districts and states cannot be made. However, 22 interviews of individuals in one district did yield good observations and recommendations for how the central office could work to best support instruction.

CHAPTER IV

DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

The work of the district central office is highly complex and multi-dimensional. The work of operating a functional school district in the 21st century depends on the implementation of many tasks by the various departments, all in alignment with policies and statutes put in place by the local, state, and federal government. It is necessary to explore the work of the central office to support high quality instruction in the context of its larger roles since 22 individuals from a wide variety of central office roles were interviewed (See Table 1) Therefore, I will examine the overall functions and tasks of participants in roles both directly and indirectly related to instruction. I will then discuss how those participants in roles not directly related to instruction versus those in direct instructional roles describe their impact on instructional leadership.

Functions and Tasks of Those in Roles Not Directly Related to Instruction

The central office of a school district is the body that operates the school district. Six individuals in roles not directly related to instruction discussed their work in the district (See Table 1). This work involves many tasks that are of vital importance to the district.

Table 2. Functions and Tasks of Those Not Directly Related to Instruction

Roles Not Directly Related to Instruction	Functions and Tasks Discussed
Director of Transportation	Dealing with crises/compliance issues Handling parent concerns Supervising bus drivers Purchasing buses from the Department of Public Instruction
Director of Security	Coordination of law enforcement
Public Relations Officer	Ensure district information is available to anyone who wants/needs it Communicating and connecting the dots across departments and schools Language interpretation for families at district and school events
Chief Financial Officer	Employee payroll Direct purchasing
Director of Student Assignment	Assigning students to schools Assisting families with questions or concerns
Director of Student Support Services	Dealing with crises/compliance Issues Providing a wide variety of support services

	for students such as counseling, food service, etc. Support and guide schools with Understanding and implementing school board policies

For example, the central office staff handles the accounting functions for the district. The Chief Financial Officer stated, "We are the ones who pay the bills for all the things that are ordered - purchasing are the ones who order all the items, and payroll, the ones who pay everyone in the district." The work of the school district begins with ensuring the school system is functioning to ensure that employees are paid and funds are moving appropriately. Without these basic yet critical needs, the school system could not even begin to focus on the needs of students.

Other important tasks include the supervision of staff such as bus drivers or the coordination of law enforcement to staff secondary schools. The Transportation Director described, "We also supervise bus drivers in this district, which is a little different from some smaller districts who use teacher assistants or cafeteria workers or custodians. We don't have those dual employees here." This particular district provides transportation services to about 19,000 students so the job of supervising drivers is quite a large task. One task for this same individual in transportation is the purchasing of buses from the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). He said, "I have to select the type of bus we will be receiving, the size of the bus we will be getting, and processing all the paperwork."

Another important function of operating a school district is the assigning of students to schools from the Office of Student Assignment. The Student Assignment Director noted, "In addition, we work to support all of our schools with policies and guidelines that are imposed by the school board of education. … All of the means of assigning students are governed and outlined by board policy." Thus, student assignment supports not only the work of assigning students to schools, but to ensure that policies and guidelines are being upheld.

The central office is also the face of the entire school district. There are many tasks and responsibilities of various individuals in the district surrounding communications and public relations. One central office staff member in the public relations department shared, "We make sure that all district information is available to anyone who wants it. We work with the community and with schools – that they get the information they need." In addition, the public relations department handles all publications, imaging, and branding for the district. There are others in the district who are not in direct public relations roles who also mentioned their responsibility for public relations. A member of the Human Resources Department stated, "I answer phone calls and emails, we get a lot of inquiries from people interested in the lateral entry programs." Thus, an important role of the entire central office is to maintain positive relations with the community no matter what the individual department or job role.

The work of the school district also involves the safety and security of its students. The Security Director stated, "We coordinate law enforcement to provide support teams for the schools and from time to time respond to the unexpected or

investigate something that's happened." In addition, she said, "We regularly access what we already have in place [for security] and also identify what the needs are at different schools". Therefore, the district must ensure that it focused on keeping students and staff members safe in schools.

Finally, several individuals talked about their roles as handling parent complaints. The Director for Student Services explained, "I handle parent concerns. Calls come into the general numbers and no one is sure where to send them, so they send them here, but I enjoy helping a parent who may have a question." The Special Education Director shared, "I deal with complaints, whether formal or informal, parents, sometimes it's just a parent phone call and we can deal with it, some are more formal through letters from a law clinic, those things do take up time, and if there is ever a more formal state complaint". In addition, the student assignment director also talked about how her office had to field complaints when families were not granted their first school choice following the lottery. The Transportation Director discussed, "I spent a huge amount of time dealing with customer satisfaction issues, principals worried about late buses or parents who are dissatisfied with pick up times, or being off schedule on a regular basis or drivers unhappy with working conditions". Thus, the management of the district often puts these individuals on the front line to address the concerns and complaints of stakeholders.

Those in roles that do not directly support instruction are responsible for essential tasks to the operation of the district. Functions and tasks such as student assignment, student support services, and public relations are critical to the work of the central office, even though they are not directly related to instruction. It is important that these roles and

functions are carried out successfully so that others in the central office can focus on instruction.

Functions and Tasks of Those in Roles Directly Related to Instruction

The central office also guides and directs curriculum and instruction. Sixteen individuals in roles that directly supported instruction also discussed their roles in the district (See Table 1). The functions and tasks of these individuals are highly varied.

Table 3. Instructional Leadership Functions and Tasks

Roles Directly Related to Instruction	Functions and Tasks Discussed
Special Education Director	Compliance and monitoring Dealing with complaints from parents Putting in place procedures for compliance Looking at student and program data
Director of Advanced Academics	Implementing the AIG plan for the district Leading the AIG steering committee
Director of Science (K-12)	Creating common assessments Creating pacing guides Developing curriculum Attending science events at schools
Director of Social Studies (6-12) and Foreign Languages (K-12)	Attend weekly curriculum meetings Meeting with teachers

	Coordinating curriculum unit writing
Director of Media and Technology	Direct media services Supervising the Educational Technology team Facilitiating media and technology PLC's
Executive Director of Program and Project Accountability	Database programming Exporting report programming Determining metrics for district programs Collaborating with departments for their data needs
Area Instructional Facilitators for Elementary, Middle, and High Schools (3 positions)	Liaison for Instructional Facilitators and Area Superintendents Support Instructional Facilitators Knowledgeable about district data
Professional Growth and Development Specialist	Support Assistant Superintendent for Instructional Services, Curriculum, and Instruction Assisted with studies and collecting data about highly qualified teachers Created and organized an aspiring leaders

	program
Curriculum Specialist for English (9-12)	Coordinate curriculum Coordinate and revise district assessments Designing professional development Coordinating teacher talent in the district
Director of Elementary Mathematics	Attend PLC meetings Provide curriculum documents to teachers Create an instruction and assessment calendar for teachers Unannounced visits to schools
Director of Assessment for Learning	Coordinate development of local assessments Liaison for Research and Accountability where they print, package, and distribute assessments Present information about curriculum for Instructional Facilitators
English as a Second Language Director	Supervise ESL curriculum and compliance Providing interpreting for conferences at schools Connect with other departments to support

	the ESL program Support ESL families to better help their child
Executive Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment	Acquiring curriculum knowledge and disseminating it to schools Oversee professional development Advise staff on implementation and delivery of curriculum and instruction Oversee ESL and AIG programs
Human Resources Specialist for Talent Development	Recruitment and retention of teachers Answer phone calls about employment inquiries Coordinate lateral entry training

The central office also functions to support the work of implementing the curriculum in schools across the district. A critical role of individuals in roles that support instruction was involving ordering materials to support the curriculum and organizing curriculum through the creation of pacing guides and unit plans. One content area specialist stated, "I'm responsible for ordering science kit materials and developing curriculum." Another content area specialist noted that she, "Provides curriculum documents and I mean by that, we suggested pacing suggestions." Another content area specialist said, "I provided curriculum documents, and by that I mean, we suggested

pacing suggestions, and I have unit plans to share with teachers as we roll out common core." One content area specialist shared, "I'm an instructional leader in the way that I am directing the curriculum, shaping the curriculum, I can bring a lot of experience. I taught lots of different subjects." This same individual made an additional connection by stating, "Getting that teacher buy in is huge – they won't trust anything you produce if they don't know that you have the life experience to back it up." Thus, this individual sees his role as directing curriculum and providing documents to organize curriculum, but he believes teachers also need to know that he has taught the concepts successfully as well.

Several of the content area specialists also talked about a high level of collaboration among other content area specialists. One individual said, "I depend on my team, there are four of us at the elementary level, two ELA and two math, and we meet and sometimes we meet with the secondary team." Another content area specialist said, "I support the other members of the Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Team, through … assessment writing, proofreading, and collaborating. We work very closely together." The science specialist, who had responsibility for all K-12 grades, explained, "We all have our weekly faculty meetings. We all get together as curriculum folks." Each of these specialists noted their consistent collaboration with each other on a weekly basis.

Supporting classroom assessment was also another common function noted by individuals who directly supported instruction. Assessment was once just thought of as a way to see what student's knew at the end of a unit. This particular school district has changed the common curriculum and instruction framework to an "Assessment FOR

learning" model. In fact, "Curriculum and Instruction" positions were changed to "Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment" roles (CIA Team) in order to emphasize the importance of assessment. Many of the content specialists discussed their role as vital to creating and revising formative and cumulative assessments for the district. One content specialist noted, "I help with the coordination and revision of district wide formative assessments." Another content specialist noted, "I take care of all the cumulative assessments for my area, all the district tests." The Coordinator for Assessment FOR Learning explained, "I oversee the development of all local assessments … I also troubleshoot any of the issues with assessments either with the administration side and what goes on in the school or any logistic issues that happen in printing and distributing." This same individual discussed his role with working on data analysis and providing a snapshot of assessment for the entire district. In addition, the Executive Director of Program and Project Accountability shared, "I work with database programming, exporting report programming, determining metrics for district programs … and collaborating with departments for their data needs." The work of assessment and data analysis has reached outside of just one or two departments.

Those who support instruction in the central office also communicate curriculum and instruction information to schools. This was an important task specifically noted by the Executive Director for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. She explained, "I am responsible for the acquisition of critical curriculum knowledge and for the dissemination of that in appropriate ways both at the school level and central office level." She noted that in a large district, this was important to ensure that everyone had the information

they needed about curriculum matters. She said, “A primary role is to advise the other staff on their implementation and delivery for our curriculum and instruction and formative assessment as a district”. Many of the content specialists also cited that communication with schools was important. One specialist described, “I am in contact with Department Chair teachers and Instructional Facilitators. I want them in the loop for everything that goes on in their building for all content areas.” Most of the content specialists cited email as their primary way of communication. One said, “I will email the department leader or grade level chair if I need to get something out to the schools, I’ll ask them to share it.” Communication with schools about curriculum matters was an important function and task of these central office staff members.

The central office influence on instruction can sometimes be direct support. Many of those in positions that directly support instruction noted that they are sometimes directly in schools. The Community Support Services director said, “We do have a program manager for school-based mental health services that will do a lot of the running from building to building, though I am the person who helps with the staffing”. One content specialist said, “Last night I was at a school science fair. I also coordinated the Science Olympiad last weekend at [a university].” Another content specialist said, “Going out in the schools and meeting with teachers with unit planning, seeing the teachers interact, I guess that’s the most enjoyable piece.” The Director of Media Services shared, “I facilitate the media and technology PLC in schools.” Another content specialist said, “I attend school based PLC meetings when I can to provide support there.” The functions and tasks of those individuals in roles that directly support

instruction do sometimes travel to the school site to interact with teachers and other staff members. How these tasks specifically impact instruction will be discussed in another subsection of this chapter**.**

Those in roles that directly support instruction engage in a variety of functions and tasks. The previous sections have discussed the various roles of those in direct and indirect support of instruction. The next sections will identify how their various roles impact instructional leadership across the district.

Those in Roles Not Directly Related to Instruction and their Impact on Instructional Leadership

The 6 individuals in roles not directly related to instruction were each asked how they are an instructional leader in the district. Most of them could not immediately articulate directly how their work impacted instruction. This section will talk about how those in these roles impacted instructional leadership in the district.

Many in roles not directly related to instruction could not easily align their work with supporting instruction in the classrooms. When asked how she was an instructional leader, a public affairs staff member stated,

> We are not instructional leaders. Our job is more to support instruction by bringing the information to light and to a broader audience. To help the district by putting together the stuff they need. As far as classroom instruction, we aren't there, but we make it so the support is in the community, the parents, the businesses, and our legislative leaders.

The Security Director explained, “I think I’m a little different. I would say that … I help work through situations and help plan ahead for the next day [following a security incident].” The Community Support Services stated,

> I think that is the hardest piece, how does [my work] directly connect [to] the classroom teacher’s ability to provide quality instruction? I impact [in] addressing the barrier for the student who’s sitting in that classroom not able to access quality instruction or at least that’s what I want to believe.

One of the most powerful statements for how those in roles not directly related to instruction support instruction came from the transportation director. He offered the following statement without hesitation,

> In order to support instruction, we have to make sure our buses are on time. The other thing we can do is have [students] in a good frame of mind when they get there. Our instruction piece is we work with drivers to provide training and coaching to not only operate the bus properly and safely, but also to work with our students to have them in a good frame of mind and are ready to learn. If we don’t greet students with a positive ‘Good morning’ or if we are off schedule constantly, then they aren’t going to arrive ready to learn. That’s how we impact students.

Not only do buses ensure that students arrive on time, but he went further to discuss the importance of students arriving ready to receive instruction. It is important to note that this individual had been in this particular district through three different Superintendents over 8 years while many other individuals interviewed had only been in their roles a short time. This is significant because this individual may have had more time to consider how his role impacted instruction, even though one might not typically think his role would impact instruction.

Another individual discussed her work and its relationship to students. The Director for Student Assignment stated,

> Even if we aren't teachers or principals in the supports we provide … we're helping families, especially with transfers or hardships, we're helping families make their lives easier because of conditions they have, maybe childcare hardships. I can't think of one thing we do that improves a child's grades because we aren't hands on with the child, but when there is a difficult situation that a child may be having personally, you know parents will come and talk. It's in a roundabout way that we reach out to families. Usually when something happens, everything is time sensitive. [We must be] able to respond.

She related her work as providing assistance to families in the middle of some kind of crisis. With the needed support, students can once again be engaged in instruction.

Some individuals shared that they support teachers and then made the connection to instruction. The Chief Financial Officer noted, "You have to pay your teachers who deliver instruction and you have to put materials and supplies into their hands. And you have to do it timely. Schools have to have the ability to maximize all the money they have so they can deliver that higher quality instruction." A human resource staff member clearly defined her work as helping to find high quality educators for each classroom. She said,

> I am not an HR professional, I am an educator. I just interviewed a middle school teaching candidate who has English, Language Arts, and Social Studies [licenses]. We have some people in our department who are professionals in HR. But, I am a certified teacher, so I make it a habit of watching to see what's going on in staff development to attending workshops, things like that, because I have to talk to folks. When [teachers] come in and say they have a problem, I can look at a lesson plan and say, well, let me show you where some of your issues may be.

All of these comments illustrate how individuals who are not in a direct instructional role see themselves in support of high quality instruction through tangible and personnel resources.

Those who are in roles that do not directly support instruction talked about their work with minimal connections to instruction. Some of those individuals were able to make connections to teachers and students, while one was able to directly state how his role impacted instruction. The next section will state how those in direct support of instruction impacted instructional leadership.

Those in Roles Directly Related to Instruction and their Impact on Instruction Leadership

The individuals in roles that directly supported instruction also described their work in relationship to their impact on instruction. One content area specialist was coordinating writing curriculum units with teachers. Thus, "[instructional support comes] through the interactions with the unit writers and giving feedback on the activities that are there, I may add some ideas or supplement what they have." She engages in conversations with teachers around curriculum and makes connections to lesson planning.

Another content area specialist supports teachers with organizing curriculum in a way that teachers can see connections across contents and standards to integrate technology. She stated,

> I'm an instructional leader through interpreting the new essential standards for information and technology. Just when you came in, I was working on a [vertical

> alignment] document K-12, that takes the essential standards and builds on them and then we'll share this in our training session.

In addition, this individual made a connection between writing curriculum documents and units to leading focused professional development to present these documents. A director for Advanced Academics stated, "I struggle with [instructional leadership] … I'm not the literacy or math specialist. People depend on me for how do we take this information and kick it up a notch for our academically and intellectually gifted (AIG) students." In this way, she is not just focused on one content area, but making sure that the units of study and lesson planning are addressing the needs of all students, but particularly gifted students. Her comment stands out from others because she engaged in conversation around curriculum, but made connections across content areas to illustrate how the curriculum will support quality instruction for special populations of students.

A third content area specialist discussed her work to help teachers understand their content standards. A content specialist shared her work as, "Playing an ongoing role in helping teachers become acclimated to those standards and helping them by providing support for implementing those standards." Even though the curriculum is in place, central office staff plays an important role in communicating those standards and ensuring the fidelity of implementing those standards through curriculum documents and pacing guides.

Assessment in the context of instruction was another issue discussed by central office staff. The Executive Director of Program and Project Accountability did state, "I'm an instructional leader in that I try to train district personnel in how to understand,

interpret, and analyze data to meet the needs of the students." Several content area specialists mentioned their role in helping to formulate formative assessments for their area in collaboration with the Assessment For Learning Coordinator. One specialist stated, "Of course it all starts with assessments. Being a part of developing assessments and overseeing the review and revision process helps me to help teachers be guided to work from the assessment and then guide instruction." The Assessment For Learning Coordinator talked about her role mostly with assisting teachers with understanding the standards, but she did state that she, "Assists the content specialists with assessments by providing training and developing a master assessment schedule."

Instructional support in this school district is composed of organizing personnel and protocols for indirect and direct support. This school district supports schools by having an instructional facilitator in each school to work with individuals and groups of teachers as they plan and implement instruction. There are area facilitators at each level, K-5, 6-8, and 9-12, who work directly to support instructional facilitators directly. One area facilitator noted, "My role is to support [instructional facilitators] … So, being in schools with them to help support them with what their role is, which their role really is to be supportive, they are not evaluators." In addition, Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment team members met collectively each week. One Director explained, "In addition to my responsibilities with the AIG plan, I have responsibilities to the Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Group to make sure that I bring the thoughts and needs of the gifted to the table." During these meetings, many of those interviewed noted that they meet as both as a whole group and in small groups to discuss the needs of

schools and how each group member can support the others. The work of instructional support seems to be to ensure that personnel and efforts are organized to support instructional facilitators and to streamline the communication between area facilitators and content area specialists.

Instructional leadership was identified as a critical piece of the work of Area Facilitators working closely with Area Superintendents and the Director of Assessment for Learning. An Area Facilitator shared,

> I see myself not as a curriculum person, but an instruction person. My responsibility is to not necessarily know that teachers know the content because either they do or they don't, but to see that teachers know how to … deliver instruction in an effective way, or to have instructional strategies which are important, what are the ways to assess that instruction. When I visit schools, that's what I focus on, instruction, how is it being delivered, how is it broken down, how is it assessed, have you thought through each instructional piece. That's what I focus on and that's what I talk with Instructional Facilitators about.

This comment is powerful because it rejected the notion that work around curriculum in isolation will affect instruction in the classroom. This individual sees her role as focused on instructional strategies and making sure that Instructional Facilitators at schools are focused on actual instruction and not just remaining focused on curriculum. Similarly, the Director of Assessment for Learning explained,

> If you think about what would a good teacher do, all of those components are represented somehow in Assessment for Learning. When teachers have a thorough understanding of their content and the standards they are responsible for teaching, it just makes instruction better.

Once again, curriculum and a clear focus on standards are important, but this comment illustrates the connection between curriculum and instruction.

Those in positions that directly support instruction also support schools more explicitly. Several of the central office staff interviewed explained that they supported schools by visiting or answering questions from principals. One content specialist explained, "I do unannounced visits to schools to touch base with them. I'm trying to make sure we are listening to their needs." The Director for Student Support Services noted that she "Works with school administrators and everyone else to realize there might be new policies and we have to be in compliance." Another content specialist noted that she, "Works with principals who have questions about content – I am new, but I am a support person for my content area. I also go out into the schools and meet with teachers with unit planning … and see their ideas." The ESL Director noted that she and her staff, "Conduct both regular interpreting for conferences and evening events at schools." The student services director stated, "I coordinate drug counseling and school-based mental health support as part of a new grant to schools." In this way, central office staff work to ensure they understand the needs of schools by visiting or by being in direct communication with school based leadership.

Central office can also serve as a model for how school based leadership can support teachers. Through direct interaction with school based staff, one Area Facilitator noted that she visited schools often and even provided feedback directly to Instructional Facilitators. In this way, she wanted to model for instructional facilitators how they in turn might support teachers. She remarked,

> I think that modeling is one of the most critical things, and modeling that support. We want our instructional facilitators to model that support to their teachers. I am here and my job is to serve you, and you need to let me know what you need, even if you don't know what you need, we can sit down and talk and I pick out from the communication what I'm hearing, patterns that I am hearing.

This statement once again makes a connection between supporting Instructional Facilitators and how Instructional Facilitators connect directly with teachers to impact instruction. Modeling the support to Instructional Facilitators was a powerful statement about the work of directly supporting schools. Similarly, the ESL Director stated that her first task after assuming her role was to make instruction a priority for ESL teachers. She noted, "The first thing that I've done since the last 5 years is to take away as many non-instructional duties away from the ESL teachers so that they can focus on instruction."

Many of those interviewed discussed their particular roles as having some contact with individuals in the schools. However, the Director for Media and Technology Services shared, "I would like to be out in the schools again, that's the foundation of building a good program." She highlighted the difference across different Superintendents and administrations since she had been in the district. Some required central office staff to take curriculum walks in schools and others made this more informal. She also noted that professional development days in schools with teachers and staff members were taken away so she has struggled to have the time to have face-to-face meetings with her teachers.

Many central office staff members referenced how they work collaboratively with other district departments. One area facilitator who works closely with instructional

facilitators at schools noted, “I help communicate and connect the dots between various different divisions and teams that work on curriculum – I sort of problem solve and figure out what groups do we need to connect in the conversation and then get the information back out.” Another area facilitator stated that she was a, “Full liaison between central office and the schools that her Area Superintendent serves and that can be supporting principals, assistant principals, instructional facilitators, teachers, parents, and children.” The Director of Media and Technology Services explained, “I represent the needs of Media and Technology and interpret those needs to a higher level.” The Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction noted that she, “Advises the other staff on their implementation and delivery for our curriculum and instruction and formative assessment for the district.” Even the Chief Financial Officer ellaborated, “Day to day, we work with all the different people, all of the departments, I deal with a lot of people. … I make sure that everything that crosses my desk is legal, that it is appropriate, and that it aligns to the strategic plan.” One director talked about his role on the curriculum team to make sure certain needs were being met by curriculum documents and programs. He remarked, “I have to work closely with the specialists. When they distribute their pacing guides and resources, that there is an area for gifted, we want it to be natural differentiation … how do I take this and go deep enough for the AIG student.” One individual had a similar statement for the needs of special education students. She said, “It’s critical to pair and collaborate and co-teach some of those things we expect in the classroom at the central office level to learn from the people who are making it happen with Common Core, differentiation, best instructional practices, and then put the Exceptional Children’s spin

on it, for our folks." In this way, both individuals collaborated with other central office staff to represent the needs of students and ensure their needs were being met with instruction. None of this would be possible without quality relationships among central office staff. One staff member stated, "I want to build relationships with people, those relationships go very far in helping us put on the radar and I will hunt people down if I need an answer, and they all know that, so I don't allow constraints to actually exist." It is important to note that all three of the above individuals serve on the curriculum team for the district, but they represent special populations of students. They collaborate for the purpose of ensuring the needs of students are being met and providing access to the content for students. Thus, all areas of central office work in some way with other departments to further the work of the district.

Professional Development was also another topic discussed in relationship to instruction. For example, one content specialist shared that he approved professional development requested by teachers in his content area. Another content area specialist noted that she, "Finds, designs, creates, and coordinates professional development needs, either the needs we see of our teachers … or the things that teachers request professional development on." The Director of Professional Development stated, "The biggest role I have had over the last few months was the Summer Catalog that went out with all the different offerings." The Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction remarked, "I oversee professional development as a district, to make sure we are adequately meeting the needs of our teachers, at all levels." Many content area specialists highlighted their role as finding out the needs of teaching and then planning appropriate staff development.

One specialist stated, "[Working with assessments and planning] has helped me to recognize the need for some professional development to be offered at the district level for literacy strategies or vocabulary strategies or reading recovery strategies. And I think that's my greatest impact on instruction." Another shared, "The instructional leader in me is staying current, staying abreast of what's going on, and then sharing that information with the teachers or meeting with teams of teachers in school and then encouraging other teachers to attend professional developments." Finally, another content area specialist emphasized the importance of using instructional strategies to model with teachers. She noted, "The first thing I think when I'm planning a training is that I try to make it hands-on. The training doesn't come through me, but I am hoping the quality of their understanding the content is raised." The professional development coordinator emphasized the need for her to be knowledgeable about district initiatives and goals. She said,

> My position relates to instruction because I am very knowledgeable about the different buckets or big rocks that our district is focused on. I'm in tune with Assessment for Learning, for the Common Core and Essential Standards roll out that North Carolina is doing. I know all the ins and outs of that. I feel like I can help teachers and help principals understand those things as well.

Central office staff members see their role as staying current with what teachers need to know for instruction.

Another set of responses around professional development were much more focused on growing teacher leadership. For example, one content area specialist saw her role specifically as, "Coordinating the talent that we have in this district … my biggest

joy is when I can pull my teachers together and that kind of synergy happens … we can help teachers have a deeper understanding of the concepts." The Director of Media and Technology remarked, "I help facilitate Media and Technology PLC's and lead professional development." Finally, a Human Resource staff member mentioned that she "Recruits teacher candidates and does lateral entry training … it's my job to make sure they are more prepared when they go in front of that classroom." In this way, these individuals see professional development as a way to impact not just teachers in the classroom, but their students, by ensuring teacher collaboration and training.

Several central office staff members talked about the importance of bringing teachers and instructional facilitators together to discuss best practices. One content area specialist stated, "Through the cadres of teachers, I try to bring new ideas to the forefront, I like to call on different people to share what they are doing in their schools." An Area Facilitator noted,

> I'm not in the school buildings necessarily, but I am in the support role and providing professional development for the instructional leaders in the buildings, the instructional facilitators … By talking to them and identifying the instructional needs in the building, and by helping to plan and design professional development.

Both individuals made connections with teachers and instructional facilitator dialogue as critical to promoting high quality instruction.

Those who directly support instruction do work directly with teachers and other school based staff to improve the instructional program. In addition, these individuals support instruction by writing and coordinating curriculum and

assessments. The next section discusses the similarities and differences between how those in different roles impact instruction.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS

The previous chapter described the roles of those who directly and indirectly supported instruction. This chapter will discuss the similarities and differences between how these groups discuss their work as it relates to its impact on instruction. Finally, I will describe the key elements that constrain their work to impact instruction.

Similarities and Differences Between Those in Direct and Indirect Support Roles of Instruction and Their Impact

The school district could not function without the work of those in roles not directly related to instruction and student achievement could be impacted without the work of those in instructional roles in the district. While those in both roles work in challenging and complex environments, the ways in which they discuss how their work impacts instructional leadership differs greatly. This section will highlight the similarities and differences between how those in these roles discuss their work as it directly relates to instruction.

Most individuals in roles not directly related to instruction were not able to connect their work directly to instruction. In fact, one individual stated, "I am not an instructional leader." When asked about how they were an instructional leader, many of them commented that they were "different" and that seemed that the question didn't apply to their work. When asked, many of the individuals did pause to consider how their

work was related and some even formulated a response that suggested that was the first time they had considered their work in relationship with instruction. While I do believe that this was a beneficial conversation for some of them.

The response was different for those in instructional support roles. Since many of these individuals reported that they were not often in schools directly, however, I wondered how they really knew what the needs were in schools. Many individuals shared that they had frequent communication with teachers, via email or some face-to-face meetings, so they were dependent on teachers and instructional facilitators to share the needs and ways in which central office staff could provide support. However, are these the real overall needs of schools or just the opinions of a few individuals?

While one or two individuals in both roles briefly mentioned the school principal, the collaboration between principal and central office staff members was largely absent from the conversations about instructional support. Some in roles not directly related to instruction mentioned the school principal if they needed to consult about a problem with bus schedules or if there was an emergency situation, but there were not clear lines of frequent communication. Those in instructional support roles did not reference the school principal at all except for two individuals. One content specialist noted that she, "Answers any questions that principals may have about her content area." In addition, the Executive Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment declared, "I rely on principals for support because my job is to make their job doable … especially in terms of giving us feedback in terms of keeping us aware of their needs." It is interesting that said she depends on support from principals, yet none of the content specialists spoke at

all about their work to support principals with instruction. Without sustained and systematic communication with school principals, how can these individuals at the central office impact instruction at a macro-level across schools?

It was clear that some central office instructional support individuals do work with school based instructional facilitators as this was referenced many times, but there is a still a lack of direct contact with principals. These individuals often lead professional learning community discussions, but ultimately it is the school principal who serves as the instructional leader for the school. What is the extent to which these instructional facilitators partner with principals to impact instruction in schools and where does the central office instructional support staff member fit into this relationship? Even when an Area Facilitator talked about visiting schools and giving teachers feedback following an observation, nothing was mentioned about collaborating with the principal to determine their thoughts and opinions about how these central office staff members could better support the instructional program in the school. Also absent from this conversation was any kind of formal dialogue between instructional support roles and school principals. Could these individuals meet with principals during a principal meeting to conduct a needs analysis of the schools? In addition, could the work of "curriculum" support be broken down to certain schools instead of an entire district? What kind of broad impact does a single individual have on science curriculum for the entire district? How could personnel be better utilized? If these individuals are mainly supporting teachers and schools with curriculum documents and formulating assessments, then perhaps they should remain in this role and have another individual work directly with schools to allow

for more collaboration and targeted support in schools that are most in need of support as determined by data and principal input.

There is a significant gap in how those in roles not directly related to instruction and those in roles that directly support instruction discuss how their work impacts instruction. In addition, all individuals were asked who they supported in their roles and one similarity was that hardly anyone discussed how their work supported principals as being the instructional leaders in their schools. In addition, it is clear that everyone is working hard in their various roles and that their work is challenging, but there seems to be a lack of leadership to bring everyone together and to see how their work cohesively links with quality instruction in classrooms. Corcoran et al. (2007) suggests that: "District and school staff members are reluctant to put aside old patterns of decision making that focus on philosophy or on the 'goodness' of an option rather than on its effects" (p. 84). I assert that this practice is occurring in the school district as evidenced by the fact that many in central office positions could not articulate how their work impacted instruction.

Constraints to the Work of Instructional Leadership

Many central office staff members who directly and indirectly support instruction referred to numerous constraints to their work. This section will identify those areas that can get impede those in the central office from focusing on the support of high quality instruction.

Constraints in Central Office Instructional Leadership

- Funding inadequate for human and material resources
- Lack of understanding of the change process – too many initiative and programs at once
- Too much bureaucracy – lack of autonomy among central office staff
- Lack of collaboration for common purpose
- Organizational structure of the district
- Lack of time between directors and upper level leadership
- Administrators without strong instructional experience
- Lack of time to work with teachers
- Public is uniformed or ill-informed about the school district
- Lack of time to train teachers in understanding data

Inadequate Funding and Resources

There were numerous comments about how procedures constrain instructional methods or ideas. Many of these ideas are not purposefully blocking the work of education but are a result of the current political state around funding and education. The Security Director noted, "I've talked with several principals who have lots of needs or requests with security and we can't do them all. That's the reality of it; we don't have the funding to do some things. In the real world, we can't meet all the needs and we can't reach out the same to all different levels." The Director for Student Support Services noted, "I know money doesn't fix everything, but I think it gives you the human resources that make a difference in a student's success not just in school but in life because you have more people available to support and serve the kids." Similarly, requests for materials aren't always approved as discussed by the Chief Financial Officer. She commented,

> I hate budget time because you have to say no so much to the people who make the magic happen in the classroom and if we only didn't have the financial restraints and if we could be able to update technology in all the schools because the children need that.

Funding makes the work of education more challenging when there are clear needs but not enough resources to go around. The ESL Director noted the constraints of federal funding to highly specific areas when she remarked, "Constraints in my role come up within the district as in the way federal funding is to be used, because I am in charge of that fund. They have become so restrictive in what you do and how you do it. At the end of the day, as it cascades down, I just have to kind of realize how political I have to be in this role." To overcome this barrier all staff members must depend on their relationships with other staff members to find creative ways to utilize funds. There are other barriers to instruction such as human resources and the organization and quality of educational leadership. The Chief Financial Officer stated,

> It's not all money, it is the quality of the person sitting in that classroom, but the reality is that money buys that person. When you are surrounded by districts that pay competitive supplements or pay more, they can wine and dine the best teacher … Sometimes they get wined and dined right out of here.

Human and monetary resources are limited and many in a wide variety of central office positions cited a lack of resources as a constraint to their work.

Perception of the School District

Constraints in the area of public relations relate to the perception of certain schools as not being supportive of students and resulting in higher transfers and the lack

of factual information about programs offered in schools. The Director for Student Assignment noted,

> I think that if our community and our families were happy with their assigned schools … maybe [there would be] less families who seek alternative education in charters or private. It's the perception of where their child is going. They don't feel like the educational needs will be met or they won't be safe. They think there is something out there that's better or different.

A public affairs staff member described the challenges when parents are not informed about the programs that schools offer families, resulting in greater movement from the district towards education alternatives. She said,

> We are battling so many things; we are working to highlight instruction. At a recent kitchen table conversation in the community it was interesting; the people kept talking about, 'We'd like to see something with Biotechnology and sustainability.' We'll, we have that at this school and that school. We have to get the word out that you don't have to go to a charter or private school to get that.

Central office staff members who are not in a direct support role for schools seem to understand the leverage they have in their positions to provide adequate support to families through service and factual information. However, they face a huge challenge when perceptions about schools in the community are not always positive.

The Change Process

With so many new initiatives and the implementation of Common Core, teachers do not always respond well to change. One content area specialist noted,

> The past, things from the past that teachers keep saying, 'Oh, we did that so many years ago' or that's not how we did it last year. That's a battle that I fight every day. … You can keep that vision in your mind if you want to, but it's not perfect and change is difficult. Real, meaningful, systemic change is difficult.

A barrier to professional development is teacher readiness to respond and implement new methods into their classroom. There does not appear to be any strategic thought about how to include teachers in the professional development process to ensure ownership.

Constraints to professional development include the idea of change and the organizational structure and process for how professional development topics are decided and by whom. The professional development coordinator shared,

> The reality is that departments are at the mercy of whatever the Superintendent and his staff is thinking about or pushing at the time. I think if there were less constraints that I would have more input for the different offerings for teachers based on what teachers say they need through the teacher working conditions survey all about what their needs are professionally instead of the district saying here's what we are going to offer. We would see needs that teachers have and could say we are going to offer sessions on this topic. Especially in light of the fact that there is no staff development money so teachers have to spend their own money for workshops unless they are offered for free or if they are offered at the school or the district level.

This individual raised an important concern that the change process isn't considered when planning professional development aligned to the goals of the district. The input of teachers is important, but if those needs do not match the district goals, how is professional development planned and implemented?

Lack of Collaboration and Autonomy

Collaboration across departments can work to support instruction and align the work in harmony. Central office staff members rarely collaborated together except during required meetings which has led to a feeling of decreased autonomy. One central office staff member noted that a lack of autonomy makes departments less efficient at times. She stated,

> [In the past], we could do our work and not have to go through the Executive Leadership Team or anything, we were trusted to do our work. Now, there's a lot more process. We don't have that autonomy anymore. It means that we aren't nearly as effective or efficient because we spend more time redoing because we have people looking at our stuff because they don't really understand communication and get bogged down in the little stuff.

It appears that there is work needed to ensure the collaboration across departments causes staff members to work with a common purpose, rather than creating more work redoing and undoing certain tasks due to a lack of communication.

There are many constraints to the work of central office staff members in partnership with each other. Many groups are organized in teams, but these groups do not always work together for a common purpose. The Coordinator of Assessment FOR Learning stated,

> The reality is, I'm part of a team, but sort of an island at the same time because I don't have the same responsibilities, and I'm not tied to one content area. I don't have a direct connection to the schools. I can't just up and decide, I'm going to X school, I would have to go through an Area Superintendent or tag along with a content specialist. In a perfect world, I would reorganize it so that I work more directly with Area Facilitators and we would work as a team to support Instructional Facilitators. I understand the need to work with the CIA team, but I would prefer to be able to work

> more directly with the Area Facilitators who would then work directly with IF's who work to support instruction. We would see more results in a shorter amount of time if I had more of that direct connection without having to go through other channels.

While one individual noted that she builds relationships with others in central office, others found that difficult. One content area specialist remarked,

> I feel like sometimes I have a role of influence and not authority to mandate certain things. We have several layers. It depends on the level of comfort of the folks, those who are above me, to open the door and let me be at the table. I feel like I am always advocating for people who I know have direct contact with principals.

This individual, spend time advocating to the right people to influence principals. Those in central office positions shared that they often felt isolated. Increased collaboration towards a common purpose was a key constraint to their work.

Lack of Time

Other constraints centered on the lack of time with the upper levels of the central office and the very organizational structure itself. One Area Facilitator was very focused on bringing instructional issues to the attention of the Executive Leadership team, but that is only possible through the interactions with the Area Superintendent. She explained,

> I wish I had more time with my Area Superintendent. I wish I had more time for her to tell me what her vision is and for me to tell her this is what I see over here, and over here, but there's not enough time for that. She and I have an hour and a half a week and that's it.

One central office instructional staff member desired more time to share the instructional needs of schools directly in a committee. However, she was not included on that

committee and was not allowed to attend. She commented, “I hope at some point I could be with [Area Superintendents] at Academic Services and meet with [Area Superintendents] and the Chief of Staff or Superintendent. It could be that I am a partner with some of the Executive Leadership Team.” This individual appears to do her best to build relationships with some members of the upper levels of leadership, but desires a more direct relationship with schools to bring the needs of students to the level of the central office.

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central office. One specialist stated, “I just don’t have enough time. There is only one of me and it’s often I’m doing 8 to 8 jobs. I haven’t had a Saturday off [in a month].” One reason for the shortage of time could be the new curriculum being implemented at the time of this study, as noted by the following statement from an Area Facilitator,

> Our curriculum and instruction [staff] is all brand new, so we are all trying to learn, not only our roles, but kind of what everyone else’s are and how do we fit all this together, so the end product the teacher sees is consistent and coherent and aligned … figuring out everyone’s role, and we are changing to Common Core, there are a lot of unknowns navigating that.

There were many new content area specialists in this district at the time of the study so many people were learning their new roles. In addition, the implementation of the Common Core and Essential Standards was a priority for the content area staff members.

Constraints with assessments were not mentioned often at all. However, the Executive Director for the Exceptional Children’s Department remarked, “I would love more time and effort to be spent on collecting and analyzing meaningful data and helping people understand data, appropriate data, and making decisions from that.” This comment shows the desire to spend time looking at data even at the micro level to track and monitor student progress for decision making.

Barriers to instructional leadership included the lack of time to focus on such areas many times due to dealing with short term crises. The Executive Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment noted,

> I am still new to my role so I feel like I am putting out fires. Some of my fires are because we have not been fully staffed … We have not had everybody in place so I have had to place some of those supports that we

> will now have people to play. The constraints are the time and that there are so many things I would like to do, but I just don't have enough hours and enough of me, energy, to extend beyond maintaining. I know we will get past that.

The Director of the Exceptional Children's Program stated, "A great deal of my time gets spent on putting out fires, dealing with crisis and dealing with issues. What it could be is managing and supporting systems and processes in place and being highly more involved instructionally." This comment makes a distinction between proactive and reactive even though sometimes emergencies do arise and can supersede the time that could be spent on instructional support to schools and other staff members. Finally, the Director of Student Support Services noted that she tries to help address the needs that keep students from accessing the curriculum. She noted,

> Where I impact the most is addressing the barrier for the student who's sitting in that classroom not able to access quality instruction. … By helping relieving some of those issues around either mental health or the just really bad behavior, we hopefully create a student who's able to not only be there in class all day, but hopefully is able to receive all that good quality instruction that is going on.

While students have many constraints that keep them from being successful, this central office staff member sees her work as trying to remove some of these constraints directly for students and was one of the few references to students throughout this study.

In addition to time, one individual discussed procedural challenges. One human resource staff member noted the challenge of bureaucracy which prevents actions. She stated,

> I would like to have more autonomy. There are so many layers … I find it more challenging to work through, or to spend all this time talking about doing the work. I'm a do the work. We spend so much time thinking about it and writing about it planning about it when we could just do it. I think most of the people in our school district are capable in their roles, but there is just a lot of hierarchy that you have to wade through.

This particular individual noted that she felt like she could impact instruction more if more time was spent implementing policies rather than discussing them.

Experience of Those in Leadership Roles

Some in central office felt that all central office leaders needed direct educational experience. One central office staff member noted the importance of educational leaders who understand the challenges and realities of leading schools and school systems. She commented,

> I think they need to have clear cut administrators who have proven records of strong instructional practice. I'm a purist. I believe that educators should be running schools. For curriculum and instruction, we need to be embedded in education and we need to make it more direct. Decide how many people you need to support the schools. I don't like to see top heavy central offices. The money needs to be with schools.

This individual believes that when those in leadership positions at the central office level, particularly in curriculum and instruction roles do not have firsthand experience with instruction, they are not able to provide the needed support for schools. While this was only directly shared by one individual, it may be significant to consider.

It is also important for those in leadership roles to have the experience and expertise to lead change in a new system. A central office member noted the challenges when individuals come into new roles and districts with more of a focus on a brand or a

program. She suggested, “Everytime we are getting some new people in, rather than looking at what is working, we’re looking at this as what I’m bringing with me, sort of my brand, and they’ll come in our [district] - so it’s really more being me-driven and district driven.” An educational leader must have the experience and insight to examine a large system and make changes for the good of the district.

Conclusion

There are many constraints to the work of the central office staff. Those in many roles cite the need for greater autonomy and resources to directly support schools and instruction. In addition, many discussed the need for greater collaboration across departments and time to coordinate the support of instruction in schools. These findings are significant for anyone involved in the support of instruction to review. The next chapter will further discuss the significance of the findings.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The data were reported in the previous chapter while this chapter consists of a discussion of the findings. This section will highlight significant findings gathered from interviews with 22 central office staff members to discover the role central office perceives themselves playing in supporting high quality curriculum and instruction. The discussion will illuminate how a modern central office functions to support instruction and how a central office could adapt to best support quality instruction. As I reflect on my data, I am reminded of what many believed so many years ago that, "Schools aren't teaching enough and students aren't learning enough" as he began the research process with the National Commission on Excellence in Education (Cuban, 1993, p. 97). The notion of the central office engaged in the work of operating a school system and being focused on curriculum and instruction is still a very new concept. After meeting with 22 individuals in the central office of one school system, a critical observation is that only 6 of the 22 individuals had been in their current role more than 2 years without significant changes to their job description. Only one of these 6 individuals was part of the curriculum and instruction team. This reminded me of the statement that, "Many administrators spend a great deal of time making changes in the structure of the organization, but most of these changes do not result in higher student achievement" (Downey, 2004, p. 7). In fact, over the course of this research study, the organizational

chart of the district changed. The high turnover and shifting of job responsibilities in the curriculum and instruction department makes it difficult to sustain change and impact instruction.

Issues

There were ten issues that emerged from this study that summarize the relationships between the central office and instruction in the district.

1. The presence of central office role delineation but absence of intentional cross-department collaboration
2. The relationship between the lack of a shared vision and too many initiatives
3. The necessity of assigning projects with clear outcomes
4. Providing support for teachers as a liaison or through direct contact
5. The lack of recruitment, induction, and mentoring for central office roles
6. The blind spot of central office personnel in roles not directly related to instruction
7. Minimal communication and isolationism
8. Poor working conditions for central office staff members
9. The absence of the principal in central office dialogue
10. The invisibility of the strategic plan

The Presence of Central Office Role Delineation but Absence of Intentional Cross-Department Intentional Collaboration

In this mid-size urban school district, there are many staff members working at multiple locations to support the work of the district. Most central office staff members appear to clearly understand how their role is defined. When asked about specific tasks

for which they are responsible, everyone could describe the work that they do in terms of formal and informal responsibilities. However, it was clear that many of the central office staff members were describing their day to day work, not necessarily what they were assigned in a formal job description. Some referenced not having a clear job description statement. Honig (2010) has noted: "Districts generally do not see district wide improvements in teaching and learning without substantial engagement by their central offices in helping all schools build their capacity for improvement" (p. iii). How can school districts engage in the work of improvement in teaching and learning when roles and responsibilities either are not clearly defined or are unknown by the support staff member?

More significantly, I discovered that many people talked about where their role ended and where other's roles began. Several area facilitators and content specialists noted that they did meet together at times, but it seemed as if meetings focused on sharing what individuals were doing each day and the conversation did not often move to how individuals could share and merge their work. Schlechty (2008) observed that schools and school districts must be composed of learning organizations where: "People continually expand their capacity to create the results they desire, where new expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together" (p. 553). It seemed as if the underlying tone throughout multiple interviews was that individuals collaborated with others on their immediate team, but that systems of individuals across departments rarely complemented each other's work or that certain collaborative efforts were even discouraged. Marzano

and Waters (2009) write of the need for: “Defined autonomy for leaders in school districts in order to maximize student achievement which can only occur if there are a set of non-negotiables for instruction which everyone is held accountable” (p. 12). It would seem that there was a level of autonomy present in the district, but that it was either not defined by those in higher levels of leadership or those individuals interviewed did not know or understand what they were. For example, many content area specialists supported each other in schools and sometimes ventured outside of their content, but Area Facilitators rarely worked with content specialists and vice versa. In addition, more than one Director stated that they were not allowed to work directly with school principals, but had to go through the area facilitator to make direct contact. Is the purpose of this chain of command to limit the number of people contacting principals in order to cut down on emails sent or to limit confusion with multiple messages going out to schools? This seems very much counter to the school reform teams as described by Crow (2011). These reform teams involve a “one stop shop” for geographically centralized school staff and include content specialists who collaborate for the specific needs of teachers. (p. 12) One Director elaborated that she was friends with everyone and people knew that she would track down whoever she needed to answer a question or support her in her work. Perhaps it is this kind of drive that is needed to affect change and provide support for high quality instruction. Wouldn’t the collective work of supporting instruction be much more powerful if no one had to “track down” anyone else? Rather, the work of supporting instruction would naturally cause everyone to work in unison.

The premise of "No Child Left Behind" was still at play in this particular school district. NCLB calls for: "Continued previous patterns of federal educational provision and funding, but also institutionalized standardized testing as the vehicle by which public schools would be measured" (Urban & Wagoner, 2009, p. 414). This district was focused on Assessment FOR Learning as the means to track and grow students. Content specialists, Area Facilitators, and Directors all cite their work as critical to shaping the creation, implementation, and analysis of data for teachers to monitor and plan future instruction. Each staff member had a role to play, but this is where collaboration was perhaps the strongest and most consistent. This affirms the claim that: "Leaders in highly productive schools have a strong orientation to and affinity for the core technology of their business – learning and teaching" (Murphy, 2007, p. 183). This school district seemed to lack a clear communication system with principals outside of newsletters and scattered face to face support.

The Lack of a Shared Vision and Too Many Initiatives

The mission and vision of the school district did not emerge in the interviews. Since most of those individuals in the district did not discuss their work as it related to instruction, there was no clear affirmation that their work propelled the district forward in its goal for advanced academics for all students. The National Staff Development Center (2002) asserts that the district office must: "Play a critical role in providing the pressure and support necessary to initiate and sustain ambitious improvement efforts" (p. 44). This is difficult if not impossible if central office staff members are task-oriented without any idea how the tasks move the district goals forward. Clearly, these individuals were

working hard in a variety of tasks, but they could not see the connection between their work and the vision for the district.

Since these individuals did not appear to be working towards a common purpose, they were not sure of what exact steps to take in their work to achieve their common goals. DuFour and Marzano (2011) discuss the need for specificity in that: "District leaders often lack a clear understanding of how to engage educators in the work at the school site. … Districts tend to rely on generalities of 'We want all schools to focus on teaching and learning' rather than clarifying the actionable steps they expect schools to take" (p. 33). Louis et al. (2010) discusses that a gap exists between visioning and bringing the vision to life and I believe this exists in this school district which spent a great deal of time developing a strategic plan and monitoring its components. However, it is clear from this study that these individuals do not connect their work to the vision of the district. Thus, it is not surprising that the staff in support roles spend their time "doing" and "undoing" their work because it is not aligned with how the work will accomplish district goals.

Another component of this lack of consistency is the presence of too many initiatives in the district as part of the strategic plan. One individual in the district stated, "There is a lot going on in the district that sometimes we lose focus on what we are here for". Another individual in this study shared, "There are 10 initiatives going on, instead of the 3 outlined in the strategic plan". This affirms Corcoran's et al. (2007) research of multiple school districts in that: "The districts themselves were not focused. They were supporting multiple initiatives simultaneously, and they expected the professional

development infrastructure to support all of them" (p. 83). In this school district, too many initiatives have led to the lack of a consistent direction, which in turn can lead to no movement toward district goals. The professional development coordinator in the district discussed being asked to develop a professional development calendar for teachers and worked to communicate with departments the kinds of staff development that would be offered. What resulted was a long menu of opinions for teachers to sign up for, but later they were told that only those tasks which advanced the current district goals would be approved. DuFour and Marzano (2011) discuss that the,

> Biggest impediments to improving schools is the unmanageable number of initiatives pursued by the central office and total lack of coherence among those initiatives … the adage 'What gets monitored gets done' has been misinterpreted as 'The more programs we monitor, the more that will get done' (p. 40)

If these departments had a shared vision with the upper levels of leadership, they would have all been focused initially on the specific opportunities for teachers that were aligned with the vision of the district. Reeves (2011) describes this as: "initiative fatigue, when there are a multitude of fragmented, disconnected, short-term projects that sap [staff's] energy" (p. 15). The comments would suggest that there is a lack of focus even with a clear strategic plan for the district. The plan could be well defined on paper, but has yet to take root and affect the day to day work of the central office staff.

Assigning Projects with Ambiguous Outcomes

Another issue from this study is the importance of consistency in defining particular tasks upfront as opposed to assigning tasks with limited information. Several individuals talked about being assigned work or large projects without clear projected outcomes and products. Once the work was done, tasks were given back for rework multiple times. One central office staff member stated,

> The most challenging thing for me is when a directive comes from the Superintendent and then it goes to the person I report to … she gave me the directive so we worked on it together. When it got back to the Superintendent, he just marked this off, this is not going along with what it needs to go with. There still was not very clear parameters about that and we weren't sure why things got marked off. Had we known in the beginning, we wouldn't have wasted all those peoples time.

Another individual shared, "We aren't nearly as effective or efficient because we spend more time redoing because we have people looking at our stuff because they don't really understand [what we do]. They get bogged down in little stuff." This issue is affirmed by the statement that districts with transformational leaders: "Recognize that improving teaching and learning across a district is a systems problem, demanding engagement of people throughout schools and central offices in coordinated efforts to realize ambitious teaching and learning improvement goals for all students" (Honig, 2010, p. 2). It is essential to examine the overall system in addition to the individual steps that are needed to complete tasks and those who are responsible for their completion.

Another example of projects without clear outcomes or procedures was identified by the Coordinator of Assessment for Learning. She remarked,

> Local assessments is challenging because I am the middle person and I'm not the direct supervisor of the people who are creating them. I have to balance support versus that they are doing what they are responsible for and it's a little awkward sometimes when that process doesn't run smoothly … but before it was the assessment for learning team that created the assessments and I actually did supervise them.

This individual's work was constrained by the lack of a clear process and outcome for how formative assessments were created in the district. In addition, the process had changed a couple of times over the last two years which further led to confusion about the process and outcome. Education Resource Strategies (n.d.) affirms that: "We must redesign central office roles for empowerment, accountability, and efficiency … District operations must be redesigned and streamlined to reflect this new service and support function" (p. 16). In this way the district's support is highly efficient, tuned into the needs of schools and anticipate needs even before they arise. Another central office staff member stated, "The whole magnet assignment plan … Public Relations was not involved in that process and when it came time for public comment, they didn't want to do that, so we had those three meetings with 300 people getting all hot and bothered and yelling". With this example, an important district decision appears not to have been thought out even with the advice of some in the district to slow down and think about the process and outcome. The top down hierarchy of the district does not seem to be effective when projects and other tasks are done without coordination and collaboration. Individuals in different areas must come together for project planning and task coordination.

Providing Support for Teachers as a Liaison or Through Direct Contact

Several directors, content specialists, and area facilitators discussed their role as a liaison between the needs of one area, for example, the Media and Technology Director and the higher levels of the district including Assistant Superintendents, the Chief of Staff, and the Superintendent. Andero (2001) describes the changing role of the superintendent and how there must be collaboration between the superintendents, school boards, and principals. Just how does this collaboration best work to support instruction in schools?

Many of those interviewed discussed their desire to be in direct collaboration with schools and teachers. One central office staff member noted, "That has gotten more difficult in the last few years … I find that I'm not going into the schools as much, but I still try to maintain a lot of contact through email, phone, and PLCs. I do try to get to places where I have new people a little more regularly." At one time in the district, those in curriculum and instructional leadership positions conducted frequent curriculum walks in the schools and provided direct feedback to principals and school leaders. This is counter to the findings of the Southern Regional Education Board (2009) who, upon studying a variety of school districts, found that: "The most-improved schools were more likely to report receiving frequent visits from district staff than were the least-improved schools" (p. 23). Some stated their desire to do be in schools more while others discussed the need to balance direct support with providing supporting documents and programs for teachers. One central office staff member commented on the need for greater collaboration across central office departments but she followed up her statement by

asking how that support should be delivered. She said, "Managing and leading such a large group of people and trying to get everyone to be a team player and making them really reflective and how to look at their roles. What kind of support do we really need to be providing?" This comment causes me to think about the power of collaboration around reflective conversations; to prioritize and plan how the level of support might vary based on the school and needs.

Another central office member remarked that she also missed the interactions with children. Thus, she accepted the invitation of a colleague to come to a school that week and read to her class. She said, "That was the best day of my week because I was able to connect with students." This individual also stated that she is not able to go to a school without first getting the permission of an area superintendent. While no other individual stated that they needed permission to go into a school, many individuals remarked on their desire to be in schools, but that their work load prevented them from being in schools as much as they would like. Another individual noted, "I would like to be out in schools … that's the foundation of building a good program. I used to have an assistant and it made a huge difference. I think with more help I would be able to focus more on the teaching and learning aspect." The content specialists that I interviewed did seem to spend some amount of time in schools, but almost all of those interviewed tried to at least have communication with individuals in schools to remain aware of their needs.

One central office staff member shared her thinking about identifying a need for further collaboration between groups of teachers. High school English teachers were

working collaboratively, but there was a need for AP teachers to form a subgroup together. She noted, "AP teachers needed a time to meet as a PLC so I added a session to a recent professional development [for this to occur]. AP teachers met with each other from all the high schools and looked at their crosswalk curriculum guides for their courses from DPI." This individual was creating an environment for teachers to collaborate directly about content and even saw the need to differentiate that further. This individual was also very reflective in their thinking and sought to create a deeper environment for teacher engagement about content and instruction. Overall, the comments from central office staff members in this district conclude that they do not routinely visit schools which is counter to Agullard and Goughour (2006) that: "[Central office staffs] should strive to know what good [instructional] implementation looks like. They should also strive to observe implementation in action" (p. 20). Central office staffs must understand good instruction, but they should also have opportunities to witness instruction and see how it is or is not leading to student learning.

The Lack of Recruitment, Induction, and Mentoring for Central Office Roles

A common issue across all interviews was the need for careful recruitment and mentoring for new central office staff members. The missing piece in this district is a lack of orientation to the work of the central office staff in supporting high quality instruction. To what extent do new individuals at the district office level acclimate to their roles by the direct support of their supervisors and do they take the time to carefully consider the district's goals and how their work will align to those goals? Most interesting was the fact that only one person directly discussed the need for induction at the central office. This

individual was hired for a position in the central office and remarked emphatically that her induction was having her office shown to her and that expectations and the role were not discussed in all. She elaborated, "There should be something in place when you bring people on, because there is nothing, it's like, ok, jump in." By the end of the study, this individual went back to teaching because of the lack of support she was afforded.

It is critical that individuals in support roles for curriculum are quality teachers but also have the skills to collaborate across schools to find and grow teacher leaders to provide wider support. Just because an individual is a good teacher does not mean they have the skills needed to coordinate large scale curriculum planning or the ability to collaborate with teachers from across schools to impact instruction at a larger level. While recruiting high quality teachers for instructional support positions at the district level may be a great place to start, those recruiting for these positions must carefully consider the leadership abilities of these individuals to impact instruction at a higher level.

Recruitment for central office positions is critical, but should only come after a serious consideration for how central office positions support schools. One individual stated,

> Central office staff members should have proven records of strong instructional practice. I believe that educators should be running schools. [Leaders should] decide how many people you need to support schools and put your resources elsewhere. I don't like to see top heavy central offices.

Time should be spent carefully considering how human resources are used to support the schools. For example, there is only one individual responsible for science across all grade and subject levels. How can one individual hope to impact science instruction in all schools? Is that human resource better spent in curriculum documents or working in a handful of high needs schools to provide direct support with teachers? The Southern Regional Education Board (2009) noted that: "Every position in the district office [should be] evaluated for its contributions to improving school and classroom practices, graduation rates, and students' preparation for college and careers" (p. 20). It seems as if this is a question for consideration along with how existing positions efficiently impact students. These questions are important for Superintendents and upper level leadership to consider even before the recruitment process begins.

Another important factor to consider is the careful selection of individuals who will be working closely with administrators and teachers in schools. One individual shared many times that he was new to his role, but he did mention an important idea for those who are in a direct support role for teachers. He said,

> I have experience that I can draw on and pull from, to be an instructional leader. That's huge with teachers. Teachers will say, well, who are you? Getting teacher buy in is huge since they won't trust anything you produce if they don't know that you have the life experience to back it up.

This statement speaks directly to those who recruit individuals to work at the central office to ensure they consider how teachers will respond and trust those in support roles.

Indeed, though there is ample research suggesting that wise decision making about hiring and retaining personnel is critical in transforming districts for student

learning (Plecki, 2010; Sofo, 2008; Honig, 2010), very few studies address the kinds of personnel positions that are needed and their roles and responsibilities. This assertion is very true based on the findings of this research. Those that support high quality instruction in some central office positions do not seem to have the training they need to support schools and their work with students.

The Blind Spot of Central Office Personnel in Roles not Directly Related to Instruction

This study purposefully included a representative sample of individuals not involved in the direct work of supporting high quality instruction. Many of the individuals in these roles did make a connection to how their work impacts instruction. I was surprised; however, that two of the 6 individuals interviewed questioned whether I was talking to the correct person when I first asked them to be interviewed. One individual emailed and stated, "You must be thinking of someone else, I'm not sure you have the right individual based on the work that I do." A number of individuals seemed unsure about the reason for wanting to be interviewed; one person was almost apologetic for not being able to clearly articulate how their work impacted instruction in the classroom.

Many of those interviewed in direct support roles did make connections to how their work supports curriculum by the end of the conversation, but it was clear that some individuals became more reflective about how their work impacts instruction through the course of the conversation. For example, one individual noted,

> We are not instructional leaders. Our job is more to support instruction by bringing the information to light and to a broader audience. To help the district by putting together the stuff they need. As far as classroom instruction, we aren't there, but we make it so the support is in the community, the parents, the businesses, and our legislative leaders.

Even by the end of her quote, she had come around to how her role impacted instruction, but began her statement with an emphatic statement that those in her department are not instructional leaders which indicate the need for more focused training around district goals and initiatives to ensure staff members see the connection to their work.

Those interviewed who were not in a direct support role had some kind of idea about how their work impacted instruction but it seemed as if some had never thought about articulating the specific connections. One individual, when asked how she is an instructional leader, stated, "This will be quick because that is the hardest piece for me to see how does it directly connect [with] the classroom teacher's ability to provide quality instruction … the thing where I impact is addressing barriers for the student who is sitting in that class."

There was one interview of someone not in a direct support role that was markedly different from the others. The Transportation Director asserted , "The biggest thing we can do to support instruction and our students is to make sure our buses are on schedule and that we have students to school in a good frame of mind when they get there." Of all the interviews of people not in a direct curricular or instructional support role, this statement was different because the individual explained this without hesitation. It was clear that he knew exactly how his role impacted students and has developed systems and processes to ensure proper training for drivers and coordination among the

department. In addition, the Transportation Director made a link to prioritizing resources linked to student achievement at schools. He said that buses should not be late, but if they are, they purposefully avoid making buses late to schools in the lowest tier or highest need areas based on student achievement. This interview highlights the impact that central office staff members can have on instruction, even for those not in a direct support role for instruction.

Minimal Communication and Isolationism

Almost every interview identified the issue of increased and intentional communication as the key to supporting schools and instruction. Many in these roles highlighted the need for systemic communication about how decisions are made and how various initiatives support the work of higher quality instruction. Rather than stating decisions and implementing action steps immediately, more work is needed for the central office to understand the process behind the work and how their roles can impact higher quality instruction. Some noted the importance of remembering that the teacher is the end user before students and to strategically consider how teachers will receive information and be more likely to implement new ideas. Many commented about the importance of teachers not getting mixed messages from central office and school staff as that leads to frustration and an increase tendency for teacher's to isolate themselves and simply "do their own thing." One individual stated,

> There are a lot of people making the ship run, and it's really hard to keep everyone in the loop on all the right things, but spending some time thinking about those communication structures, and thinking about how teams overlap and developing protocols for how we communicate – that's what will make a difference for kids.

Another individual shared, “In the last few years everything that had become very unified is now silo’d, so there is no interplay between, you know, it seems like to me that everybody that’s a leader kind of wants to be a leader and have their own posse.” Greater communication could result in a decreased sense of isolationism as central office staff see how their work relates to the work of others and thus increase collaboration.

If there is little consistency across departments because of a lack of collaboration, this leads to isolationism and is counter to the idea of Professional Learning Communities. Can the central office be a Professional Learning Community that transcends walls, departments, and organizational protocols? Isolationism fosters the notion that self is more important than the group. One central office staff member said,

> Central offices have to break down the silos; they’ve just got to break it down. When it comes to making changes, you must first seek to understand and look around at what’s going on. Everytime we get new people, it’s what I’m bringing with me, that’s sort of my brand and I want this [group] to recognize me and then they’ll say we want that person, it’s being more me-driven and district-driven.

This individual had been present in the district through many leadership and organizational changes and seemed concerned by the genuine lack of a collaborative approach. Some in leadership positions seemed more concerned about their own aspirations rather than the realization of district goals. Another central office staff member shared,

> The central office cannot have departments working in silos. Even though we aren’t always connected directly to quality instruction, there’s so many pieces that we do have that we do need to be at the table, often others

> don't see the interconnectness to other departments to make a difference in what they're doing.

Carney (2010) advocates: "Professional learning communities at the central office level which can provide stronger leadership and support for the work that must be done by school leaders and teachers in the district's schools" (p. 69). It is impossible to propel the district forward in its goals when there is an absence of collaboration and trust. It makes sense that if departments and various programs are never at the table together, they can never fully understand each other's work and how individuals could align their efforts towards a common purpose.

One Area Facilitator mentioned the creation of a PLC for Instructional Facilitators. She stated, "We have a 3 hour PLC once a month. Then, we do something that I love, we do Instructional Facilitator walkthroughs. I find it very rewarding as I listen to how they talk with each other … Can you send me that? Where did that come from?" These individuals expressed a strong need to work together to support instruction and not be locked into their specific tasks.

A lack of collaboration and fragmentation across districts also leads to an uninformed approach to support. One central office leader discussed the importance of taking time to collaborate across districts with further supports. This was the only reference in my research study to individuals working outside the district. She noted, "PLCs and collaborating with other people in similar roles [in other districts] is definitely a support piece … particularly because we are part of the consortium and that has been very supporting for all of us. We can talk and bounce ideas off each other and align our

processes." This individual referred to systemically setting aside time for all of these efforts. In order for the district to realize sustained improvement, everyone must see their role through the lens of how to improve instruction as they take a: "System wide approach to improving instruction and a district-organized set of strategies to improve instruction" (Togneri & Anderson, 2003, p. 5).

Poor Working Conditions for Central Office Staff

The working conditions at the central office level should create an environment for collaboration that meets the needs of schools and teachers. One individual noted,

> The central office can be a place that is very cold, very sterile, people aren't interested in knowing each other. It's almost if they're afraid to know people because you don't know how long they will be there. I equate it to children. Children cannot learn or function in an environment for fear and distrust.

Relationships are also built on trust and confidentiality. Another staff member said, "Central office must just all feel like we're all part of the same team and it's not the, you know, team over there I call to complain about something, we have to realize we have some connections and let's get everyone talking." One central office staff member who had been in her current role for many years stated, "People know that I will track them down for an answer if they don't respond, so I'm a people person and I will show up and speak with them, not just send them an email." Another central office member discussed the creation of PLCs for Instructional Facilitators and remarked, "They have grown close with each other across schools and I like that." Because these individuals have spent time together dialoguing about their roles, they will now turn to each other for support. In this

way, the intentional personal communication allowed these individuals to ensure a positive working environment.

Trust and confidentiality was another important topic when discussing the climate at central office. One individual said,

> I think the best leaders are those that are discrete. Anything goes in and nothing comes out. I truly love that because then I know that if I have an issue and I go to the office and I say I really just need to, may I run this by you, and I know I won't hear it from somebody else three days later.

Another individual stated, "I think the hypocrisy of what we expect at the classroom level compared to what we do at the administrative office level will always be a barrier unless we look at how we work together at the central office level". This individual noted that districts can't empower and implore teachers to work together to meet student needs when those in central office positions supporting instruction seem isolated, inconsistent, and haphazard. Similarly, Fullan (2008) argues that employers must love their employees. One of the ways to do this, according to Fullan, is to: "Create the conditions for them to succeed" (p. 25). In addition: "[Supervisors] must help all employees find meaning, increased skill development, and personal satisfaction in making contributions that simultaneously fulfill their own goals and the goals of the organization" (Fullan, 2008, p. 25). Many in this central office stated that they do not feel they are part of a collective team and do not appear to have meaning in their work.

Transformation for greater student achievement is possible when central office administrators: "Help facilitate those connections by ensuring that they actively listen to and connect with teachers and principals. This active listening needs to be characterized

by treating staff as equal partners rather than subordinates" (Sofo, 2008, p. 408). Relationships among individuals at the central office level are critical to the implementation of district goals as: "When the individual soul is connected to the organization, people become connected to something deeper – the desire to contribute to a larger purpose, to feel they are part of a greater whole, a web of connection" (Lewin & Regine, 2000, p. 27). Lewin and Regine assert, we must: "Pay as much attention to how we treat people – co-workers, subordinates, customers – as we now typically pay attention to structures, strategies, and statistics" (p. 27). For indeed: "Districts can get tough about student learning, can use their minds to identify new and better ideas, and can establish strategies and mechanisms for development. But successful strategies always involve, relationships, relationships, relationships" (Fullan, 2001, p. 70).

The Absence of the Principal in Central Office Dialogue

There is one factor that is glaringly absent from this research study. The collaboration between central office and schools was absent in this study. Individuals were asked specifically about who in their role do they support and there were only a few small instances that they supported the school principal in promoting high quality instruction at the school level. While the role of the principal was not discussed specifically for this research study, I did predict that central office staff members would discuss their support of instruction in partnership with the school principal. This simply was not the case and is counter to the notion raised by DuFour and Marzano (2011) that: "Essential to effective district leadership is a strong partnership with capable principals … the research surrounding the importance of effective school leadership in creating the

conditions for effective schooling is growing rapidly" (p. 47). With only one exception, the work with principals was not mentioned by individuals in this district.

One might conclude that the central office leadership for the support of instruction is not sure how their work relates to the work of principals. One district staff member shared, "I feel like I am always advocating for people who I know have direct contact with principals. Principals are the ones who run the schools. … Principals could see our work like it used to be with the organizational change." This individual felt as if principals were the ones to affect change in schools, but she was not always able to communicate directly with them; instead she had to reach out to those Area Superintendents to bring the message to principals.

Is it necessary for central office staff members to have a clear chain of command, or should they be able to impact principals and schools directly? DuFour & Marzano (2011) state: "It is almost impossible for a single person to fulfill all of the responsibilities of the prinicpalship" (p. 60).What better way to support the work of schools than to have the right people in support roles working in partnership with the schools? McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) note that principals are in a: "Key strategic position to promote or inhibit the development of teacher learning communities in their school" (p. 56). So why was the role of the principal in the support of high quality instruction hardly mentioned by the individuals in this study? For in fact: "Principals are sometimes seen as managers who provide little support or direction for teaching and learning in the school, [but other times] principals are actively involved in the sorts of activities that nurture and sustain strong teacher community" (McLaughlin & Talbert,

2001, p. 110). If the district wanted to truly support and impact the work of instruction, they must partner with principals to understand the holistic state of instruction in a building. Only then can the central office support staff understand the key needs of a school and the district and then begin to plan to address the needs.

In place of the principal, many in central office positions described their work with instructional facilitators. While the instructional facilitator may be able to identify certain needs across grade and subject areas, the principal is the instructional leader in the building and must be part of the conversation. Some individuals remarked that they work with the instructional facilitators to identify needs and plan professional development. While these individuals are often master teachers, they may not have the skills needed to evaluate quality teaching and provide descriptive feedback. Honig (2012) cautions that,

> Instead of relegating responsibility for such principal support to coaches or mentors located within other central office units, executive-level staff—those reporting directly to superintendents, deputy superintendents, or the equivalent – work intensively with principals to strengthen their instructional leadership (p. 734).

The instructional facilitator should certainly be part of the conversation for support, but placing the school principal on the periphery delegates' instructional leadership to someone who may not have the experience or expertise to really understand teacher needs. The Southern Regional Board (2009) considered that the school principal was the "solution". The power of the principal is that,

> Principals can profoundly influence student achievement by working with teachers to shape a school environment conducive to learning, aligning instruction with a standards-based curriculum, organizing resources to

> improve classroom instruction and student learning, and making good decisions about hiring. Without such on-the-ground leaders, schools stand little chance of helping more students meet grade-level or higher standards. … Yet having such leaders in place is not enough. Even the most talented and best-trained principals will fail if their working conditions do not support their improvement efforts (p. iii).

Perhaps this particular district should carefully consider the role of the principal in high quality instruction and further link its support staff to working in partnership with them.

The Invisibility of the Strategic Plan

I was very alarmed that only one district staff member directly asserted how the district's strategic plan drove her decision making processes. When asked about how resources are allocated, she stated, "The strategic plan is a guide to help drive us in the right direction. It's like a compass." In a district that had spent almost a year developing the plan with multiple stakeholders, it seems as if the plan wasn't a clear part of the daily practices of district individuals since only one out of 22 even mentioned the plan. This comment represents the only time the plan was referred to in over 16 hours of interviews.

I was surprised that this was the only reference to the strategic plan considering 6 months had been spent to develop the plan. Listening and learning tours involving teachers, school administrators, parents, and other community members occurred for weeks to gather input about the needs and future of the district immediately after the arrival of the new Superintendent. Indeed, the district launched the strategic plan to great pomp and circumstance to direct and guide the district towards its future goals.

This causes me to ask several questions. Were individuals in the central office carrying out their daily routines without considering the strategic plan, or were their tasks

so linked with the strategic plan that it was understood as the reason for their actions? DuFour & Marzano (2011) state: "The willingness to articulate fundamental goals, the strategies for achieving those goals and the indicators that will be used to monitor progress toward the goals are vital to effective district leadership." This particular district did articulate its goals and strategies for how to achieve their goals, but the indicators used to monitor progress towards these goals were not articulated by individuals interviewed for this study. The goals and strategies were not stated as being derived from the strategic plan which would create a common language among all district staff members. This common language would then cause each individual to state immediately and emphatically that they are an instructional leader!

Though the creation of the strategic plan was a long process and involved the work of many stakeholders, I wonder how much input was gathered from those in central office positions considering that there was only one specific reference to the plan. Waters and Marzano (2006) concluded that: "Superintendents and district leaders must include all relevant stakeholders including central office staff, building-level administrators and board members in establishing goals for their districts" (p. 3). It could have been a very helpful and informative session to engage in conversation with the central office staff members about their work. Many of these individuals stated that they see the value in being in schools for direct support for students. These individuals could have shared this information at a listening and learning tour of the central office staff and ensure they had a voice in shaping how their roles might be defined and implemented under new leadership.

CHAPTER VII

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of the central office in the support of high quality instruction. Findings were based upon the perceptions of 22 individuals interviewed in one central office of one school district. This chapter will discuss recommendations based on the findings and provide additional ideas for future research studies.

The central office is a dynamic and fast paced environment. Ultimately, the central office must operate the school district, but this study has examined the impact that the central office has on the instructional mission of the schools. Individuals interviewed represented the Director and Executive Director levels of leadership. This study illuminated the role of these individuals and the importance of collaboration to meet the needs of schools and students in a large urban district.

Recommendations for Central Office

Major Recommendations

Define all central office roles as they relate to instruction, including those roles that may not be directly related to instruction.

First and foremost, everyone should be talking about instruction! All individuals at the central office level, regardless of their role, should understand and articulate how their day to day tasks champion the work of the district towards quality instruction and

ultimately greater student achievement. Interviews for potential central office staff should include a question about how interviewees perceive their prospective role to be related to curriculum and instruction. There is no way that a district can realize high quality instruction in every classroom in every school if those at the highest leadership levels cannot articulate how their work impacts the district's classrooms.

Establish systems for the recruitment, induction, and mentoring of central office roles.

There is a great need to carefully analyze how individuals are recruited for central office instructional support positions. Just because an individual is a great teacher and may be able to provide quality instruction in a classroom does not mean the same individual will be able to lead a district of multiple schools toward higher quality instruction. Hiring the right people for the right positions is critical for consistency and systemic support for high quality instruction in schools. It is essential not to simply "fill" central office positions quickly, but to thoughtfully discern those with the talents, skills, and backgrounds to transcend good teaching towards great coaching, mentoring, and support of those working in schools. Once the right individuals are in the right roles, there must be an induction system to acclimate new staff to the central office level. While roles will be highly varied, the mechanism of the central office workings can be shared along with dedicated time between the evaluator and the new staff member to clearly define the role and its responsibilities.

Establish ongoing contact between central office staff and school principals.

When directly asked about who they support in their role, almost no district office personnel in this study directly shared that their role was to support the principal develop high quality instruction in their school. Since the role of the principal was not discussed by individuals in their interviews, perhaps there is greater collaboration among the district central office staff members and instructional facilitators at schools. The principal was absent from almost all discussions of how central office instructional staff supports instruction in schools. As the instructional leader in the school, the principal is the lone individual ultimately responsible for the quality of instruction in schools and therefore must have the direct support of central office staff members. Central office staff must have regular contact with principals in small settings, separate from large district meetings which sometimes do not allow for individual school conversations.

Carefully consider the organizational structure of the central office in terms of how positions and roles directly support schools.

School districts must consider how roles in the organizational structure of the central office have contact with schools. If no one at the central office level visits schools, it is not possible to address the needs of schools because no one knows what their needs are. Phone calls and emails are an important part of this support, but there is nothing more powerful than walking the halls with principals at the school level to witness first hand where greater support is needed. This is turn provides a bigger picture for the central office staff to coordinate efforts across schools with similar needs. The district will have its greatest successes when the central office and schools go hand-in

hand. This is possible when the district clearly asserts that specific strategic positions should spend time in schools in contact with school based staff.

Minor Recommendations

Develop a system to survey and address working conditions at the central office level.

While much has been discussed about teacher working conditions, very little has been discussed about central office working conditions. This study illustrates that those in central office positions have much to say about their working conditions. Most significantly, trust is an essential component as central office staff work together to support instruction. Trust can only come from collaborative partnerships built over time with a clear understanding of how roles are interconnected. These partnerships create a positive working environment at the central office level and are critical to the success of the district, its schools, and students. Central office staff members must be given the opportunity to share their own perceptions to then allow the district to consider ways to strengthen the working conditions of their leaders.

Define and delineate the instructional facilitator role as it relates to instructional leadership and the principal.

Instructional facilitators can be instrumental in the instructional program of a school. However, the principal remains the heart of instructional leadership at the school and is ultimately responsible for the academic success of students. With a well-defined focused role, the instructional facilitator can be a very important component of instructional leadership, but it can never supplant the role of the principal. Districts must carefully consider the specific charges of these facilitators as being fundamentally

different from principals, but also to encourage their strong collaboration and partnership.

Limit initiatives emanating from the central office to three or four and make sure they are aligned with the district's vision.

With each new initiative not aligned directly with the district's vision, the vision becomes increasingly hazy. This can result in a lack of unified direction towards district goals. Districts must carefully consider a limited number of initiatives which provide the greatest alignment with the district's vision.

Consider how central office positions link with other central office roles.

Everyone is very busy in their individual roles. It is essential to consider how departments and roles overlap and to provide time for individuals to work together across departments and roles. This may be especially true for large district events or initiatives that will require input and coordination from many groups. If common links across positions and departments are clear from the beginning, the outcome will be more consistent.

Assign projects with clear expectations and outcomes.

Tasks to be completed by central office staff members must be clearly defined in terms of expectations and outcomes. Prior to task assignment, leadership should consider how the needs of a project may overlap with multiple roles so to include everyone in the process from the outset. Tasks can be more successfully implemented when those who complete them understand the purpose and results that should develop from the project.

Develop systems to increase central office communication as a vehicle to minimize isolation and promote collaboration.

Districts should protect time for groups of individuals to share their ideas and current projects. In addition, groups of individuals who work in similar areas must be given additional time to coordinate their work. For example, if there are different individuals involved with K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12 Language Arts, all of these individuals must routinely share their work and discuss trends to support the work of district literacy as a whole.

When developing a strategic plan for the district, gather input from the central office staff and ensure they understand how the plan should guide their work.

In order that collaboration is towards a common purpose, districts and schools must both dialogue about a shared vision and implement and monitor specific concrete strategies and programs to accomplish their goals. Central office staff members must have the opportunity to share their input and then connect their work to the components of the strategic plan.

Recommendations Beyond the Central Office

External policy makers must respond by creating policies to better provide monetary and personnel support to schools and central offices. Policymakers have a role in that they set the tone that support from central office is valued and needed. That, in turn, provides districts with needed flexibility and funding to staff these positions with individuals who are trained to do the work.

School boards must seek out Superintendents who are committed to a central office level organization that promotes and supports schools. Principal and school based support must be a priority since schools, in turn, support students and families. In short, customer support is just as important in schools as it is in corporate America.

I believe it is important for educational leadership programs to consider the perceptions of the central office support team interviewed for this study. Many students who enter these programs seek to become school based administrators, yet many individuals go into lower level central office leadership or will one day move onto higher levels of leadership. District level leadership and how districts support schools is a critical component of educational leadership.

Recommendations for My Personal Work

As a school administrator, I can draw some important implications for myself. Many of those interviewed in the study referred to themselves as a "liaison" between schools and the central office. In my own work, I am trying to broker those kinds of connections and relationships. For example, with the new common core curriculum, I must be intentional about trying to connect various groups with each other. For example, at the beginning of the school year, I purposefully set aside time for teams of teachers to meet in vertical groups to increase collaboration and grow relationships among teachers to support best practices. This included coordinating efforts with another principal at a middle school so that 5th grade teachers could be in communication with 6th grade teachers to share curriculum and instructional topics. This will hopefully lead to a

decreased sense of isolation for teachers and allow a team of teachers to collaborate together for the benefit of students.

Following these interviews, I have reflected about what the future may hold for my own career. As a new principal, I am working to establish a culture in the school to support collaboration around best practices for greater student outcomes. At some point, I may consider pursuing a central office position, but I will do so cautiously and consider how I might be ready to lead at a higher level. I will carefully consider my own abilities to collaborate across networks of schools and would seek to learn more about other aspects of central office leadership. If I decide to pursue the Superintendency, I feel that I have begun the process to consider what this would mean for me, but I also know that this would take time and I would need to carefully consider the kind of district that might be the best fit for me. I have heard loud and clear from this central office that hiring for the central office level is of paramount importance. I also feel that I would need to spend time reflecting what I believe as a leader for a district of staff, students, and community and continue to build upon my public relations abilities as this was an important category in interviewer responses. Ultimately, this study has allowed me to consider how a large organization could work together with a common mission and vision and thinking about what could be barriers to supporting high quality instruction.

Recommendations for Further Research

Because the work of principals was not mentioned by most of those interviewed, a study should be developed to investigate principal perspectives about how central office instructional staff members support the instructional work of schools. Those responses

compared with the responses of the central office staff members could bring to light commonalities and inconsistencies. Principals' perceptions about support could be an invaluable tool for determining how to implement various district initiatives and components of a strategic plan. This study could investigate how central office instructional staff support is impacting teachers and students.

Another study could be developed to further investigate the interviewing and hiring process for central office staff as well as how these individuals are inducted and mentored. Central office could also adapt by ensuring that the right people are hired for the right roles in central office. Many in the district have commented that turnover at the central office level is very high leading to uncertainty about who to contact with content related questions. In addition, some have said that when people come in, it is often about what those individuals bring with them rather than listening and learning about what is working and building from there.

Another topic of interest could be a quantitative study investigating the working conditions among central office staff members similar to teacher working conditions surveys. Central office staff member empowerment, as well as support for training and implementing district policies could be valuable pieces of data and could be compared with district instructional data outcomes from students. How do the working conditions at central office impact how staff members respond to the needs of schools and affect instruction?

This study was merely an exploratory study of the work of central office staff in supporting high quality instruction. Ideally, I would like to have spent time shadowing

central office staff members to see firsthand the work that they do as compared to their interview statements. I was only able to capture the statements by central office staff members without really seeing the work that they do.

While a case study approach allowed me to discover the support for instruction in one district, school districts are extremely varied and have organizational structures that fit the needs of their current administration and schools. A wider approach to data collection is needed in both urban and rural school districts to uncover how individuals support instruction in a variety of school districts.

I believe that the school principal was the missing link in this research study. Very few individuals mentioned the significance of the principal to promoting and supporting high quality instruction. A further topic for exploration is how the capacity of the school principal in coordination with central office support impacts instruction. In addition, how does the impact on instructional facilitators and coaches that is derived from central office directly impact the classroom? There are many layers to peel away to determine exactly how support translates into classroom practice.

Final Thoughts and Conclusion

Those in roles not directly related to instruction should be able to articulate directly how their work impacts instruction and be part of instructional conversations to maintain and sustain their knowledge. Ultimately, the absence of the principal in collaboration with central office staff is alarming since principals are charged to set the standard for high quality instruction at their schools. Even when these central office staff members were explicitly asked how who they support in their role, they did not report

that the support of principals was part of their work or that it was significant. School districts can't hope to establish high quality instruction as the norm across schools for sustainable change without input of the school based principal. In addition, central offices must hire and retain individuals for curriculum and instruction roles with a deep understanding of instructional practices in the classroom and with the ability to act as a liaison with those in upper levels of leadership. Furthermore, these qualities are essential to impact instruction across schools when the individual can identify best practices and involve teachers across the district in meaningful conversation and collaboration. Thus, central office staff in direct support roles for instruction must make their sphere of influence as large as possible through intentional communication and collaboration with other teacher and district leaders.

The work of the central office is dynamic and complex. There are certainly tasks critical to the work of schools regarding budget, personnel, operations, and instruction. The critical heartbeat of a district must be the work of increased student achievement but there are many layers that impact students. How do these layers of support impact instruction to impact students? This study has brought to light the perceptions of central office staff as they work to support instruction and examined how current central offices offer this support. Most important, this research has only begun to explore how central offices might best adapt to meet student needs. First and foremost must be the collaboration between the principal and the various layers of support staff from the district. In addition, districts must carefully consider who is engaged in the work at central office and how they are trained and mentored. The central office must be a

Professional Learning Community where individuals with a common purpose work together to meet the needs of schools. For this work, no one can "stay in their own lane" as the functions of the central office often intersect together. With clear communication, clear expectations, and a common purpose, the central office can engage its schools and teachers towards higher quality instruction. Perhaps the best way for this critical work of support to be maximized is for central offices to reflect upon the idea that "How we spend our time shows what we value the most."

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Question 1	Please summarize your role in the district.
Question 2	What are your formal responsibilities?
Question 3	What are your informal responsibilities?
Question 4	Which roles or responsibilities are the easiest and why?
Question 5	Which roles or responsibilities are the most challenging and why?
Question 6	What tasks or responsibilities are you involved in that may not be part of your written responsibilities?
Question 7	What people and roles do you support in this position? Who do you depend on for support?
Question 8	How do you care for the needs of so many schools with so many different populations of students?
Question 9	How are you an instructional leader? How does your position relate to instruction?
Question 10	As you meet with other individuals in the district, how are you part of the discussion when test scores and assessment of learning come up? Are you included in the wider discussion?
Question 11	What are your key responsibilities related to instruction?

Question 12	Give concrete examples of how you in your role have positively affected improved instructional practices.
Question 13	How does your position connect to other curriculum and instruction leadership?
Question 14	Give concrete examples of challenges you face in your area and how they might link with improving instruction?
Question 15	Describe the reality of your role versus what it could be given different circumstances and constraints?
Question 16	What general recommendations might you offer as central offices realign to be more focused on instruction and student learning?