



## Chapter 1 — Examining Support for Continuous District Improvement from Central Office Inquiry: Assessing Organization, Roles, and Functions to Support School Improvement

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## Examining Support for

# Continuous District Improvement

### *How does the central office determine what structures are needed to help schools continuously improve?*

A district's school improvement structures can be positions, strategies, programs, or approaches (e.g., adding a literacy coach position to a school, reciprocal teaching, Math Counts). There are several approaches school districts take in identifying and selecting improvement structures for their system. Some districts may choose to have schools engage in site-based planning processes that identify specific school needs and solutions. In other districts, the central office may decide to select school improvement approaches based on broad districtwide needs identified through data analysis. Some may decide to build on existing strengths, as when, for example, a district that has already invested significant resources in teacher professional development in literacy decides to implement peer coaching in this curricular area. A district may also decide to use some combination of these approaches. Whatever strategies are chosen, the process works best when schools participate in the choice.

#### ALIGNMENT OF STRUCTURES

Regardless of how improvement structures are selected, they should be in harmony with the central office's espoused theory of action (see box on page 10). For example, if the central office theory of action holds that schools improve through identifying and meeting local needs, the central office would minimize mandates that override site-based decision-making. District structures should also be aligned and support each other. In illustration: if a math focus is chosen, the district may adopt specific math strategies, provide ongoing professional development with accompanying materials, and create a site-based math coach position to support school-level implementation. To further strengthen implementation, another position might be added at the district level to provide ongoing assistance and professional development to site-based coaches. This coherent approach — a theory of action driving aligned structures at all levels of the system — furnishes optimal support for implementation. The figures on the next two pages offer examples of improvement structures and help illustrate strong and weak alignment.



## Example Structures From Research District 1

Looking across the intended outcomes, it is evident they all focus on strengthening the school plan and improving student achievement.

Structure > >	Improvement Process	Site-Based Coach	Regional Supervisors
Description	Four steps: creating current status statements, identifying immediate needs, creating action plans, and monitoring outcomes	School-level position created to support the creation and implementation of the school plan	Administrative position that oversees the principals' work on the school plan
Target Audience	Principals and schools	Schools	Principals
Intended Outcome	Whole-school creation of a plan that guides continuous improvement with the outcome of improved student achievement.	School plans will be stronger and therefore improve student achievement..	The school plans will be stronger and therefore improve student achievement.

## Example Structures From Research District 2

Looking across the intended outcomes, it is evident the walkabout and leadership institute are aimed at the principal. The literacy initiative is focused on K-3 teachers, while the walkabout is to benefit all classroom teachers. The literacy initiative is not connected to any other structure.

Structure > >	The Walkabout Process	Literacy Initiative	Leadership Institute
Description	Observing school and classroom practices and discussing implications	Program to support literacy instruction and build teachers' skills in teaching literacy	Programs to support and build administrators' capacity as instructional leaders
Target Audience	School administrators, Classroom teachers	Elementary schools (primarily K-3 teachers)	Administrators at various levels (prospective, new, and veteran)
Intended Outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Awareness of existing instructional practices</li> <li>Development of key attributes of strong instruction</li> <li>Identifying staffs' instructional skills and weaknesses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consistent and strong literacy instruction in grades K-3 districtwide</li> <li>Common understanding of district's literacy goals</li> <li>Common literacy training for all elementary teachers</li> </ul>	Develop and support cadres of school site administrators focused on instructional leadership

### Example Structures From Research District 3

All structures focus on teachers. Aspects of the focus on professional development – reading, and school-level study groups – are related to the school-based staff developer. The connection between the content of the professional development focus and the new teacher program is unclear. It is also unclear how content areas other than reading are connected to the school-based staff developer. It does not appear that the school-based staff developer is connected to the new teacher program.

Structure >>	Focus on Professional Development	School-Based Staff Developer	New Teacher Program
Description	A mixture of approaches to PD, including: endorsements in reading and ELL, school-level study groups, school-level inservice, district-level new teacher training, district math training	Full or part-time school-level professional developer position filled by a teacher leader	Mandated state teacher induction program Criteria outlined by state program designed by district
Target Audience	Teachers	Teachers	New teachers
Intended Outcome	Teachers will be more skilled and able to implement their skills in the classroom.	Teachers will be better literacy instructors through the support of the school-based staff developer.	New Teachers will receive continuing certification and be more prepared for teaching in the district.

#### CENTRAL OFFICE SUPPORT FOR STRUCTURES

One way the central office supports school improvement is through assisting principals and/or school staff to understand and implement the structures. This means that central office staff themselves must understand the specific structures, their intended use and alignment with the district goal, and what effective implementation looks like. This does not mean they become experts in all the structures but that they are well-versed and able to go into the schools and communicate with principals and/or teachers about implementation issues. They also play a key role in observing, giving feedback, and assisting in problem solving. Their presence alone can serve as a reminder for schools to maintain the course. If principals and/or teachers perceive that the central office does not support their efforts, they may begin to pursue their own direction with no one to help them, thus leading to isolation. They may begin to grab at other programs because they're not getting the immediate results from the current direction. The school then loses momentum and focus. Staff morale may decline. Over time, this begins to debilitate the central office shared theory of action, leading to fragmentation and retreat into individual silos.

#### Research Finding

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 what good implementation looks like. They should strive to observe implementation in action.



### What is a Theory of Action?

One's theory of action is a set of assumptions that should guide decisions and actions. Argyris and Schön (1974) differentiate between theories that are merely espoused and those that are enacted (i.e., in use). An espoused theory may not be enacted and an enacted theory may never have been espoused. Espoused theories can be captured by asking someone what they would do in a particular situation. A theory in use is evidenced through actions. These theories operate in many aspects of our lives. For example, there are various espoused theories on childrearing. With newborns and toddlers, most often our stated beliefs include the importance of keeping them safe and healthy and teaching them to be nice. Actions that follow these beliefs include using car seats, closely supervising children, and guiding their interactions with other children. As children age, assumptions and beliefs about what is important to their development also change. At school age, we espouse the importance of children developing responsibility, with expectations for them such as keeping their room clean and feeding the family pet. To ascertain if these theories are in use, parenting behaviors must be observed.

Applying the construct of espoused theory of action to the central office is a bit more complex, but it works similarly. For example, Superintendent Harry espoused that school improvement was about changing individual behavior and that efforts to change behavior had to be designed to match how the individual learns. Further, these individuals needed to feel ownership in the learning process for this change to occur. Superintendent Linda's assumptions about school improvement centered on quality professional development for teachers. She defined quality professional development as ongoing and concentrated, with 50 percent of the time spent in teacher instruction and the other 50 percent in classroom implementation with feedback. In both of these situations, the enacted theory would be found through observing the superintendent's actions.

### IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION IN CONTINUOUS SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Open communication is critical to school improvement. An important role of the central office is to establish channels of communication for dissemination and collection of information, such as weekly visits to schools, district staff attendance at school and principal meetings, and using newsletters and suggestion "boxes." To ensure effective dissemination of information, multiple ongoing opportunities to engage in communication with schools must be consciously created and maintained. It is most effective when communication includes both verbal and written forms and formal (e.g., monthly administrator meetings, handbooks) and informal (e.g., telephone conversations) channels. Effective leaders provide information in ways that do not antagonize their constituency, and they allow differences to emerge and be discussed. Words or tones that are condescending, accusatory, and/or demeaning are monitored and removed.

Providing consistent information is paramount. This means all administrators communicate the same message so schools get consistent information. For example, a superintendent might request that each assistant superintendent have their assigned schools write a report about progress toward their achievement goals. The expectations for this report, including the amount and kind of data to be included and the required format, would be clearly detailed and communicated so each principal would get the same information and therefore create the required report to specifications the first time. Furthermore, the message itself must be clear and unambiguous. Without ongoing access to consistent information, schools often waste valuable resources correcting mistakes made as a result of miscommunication. This may lead to resentment and unwillingness to complete district requests.

Established and trusted channels for communication are essential at all levels and are a core feature of reforming districts (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). As with information dissemination, the central office must also create ongoing opportunities for principals, teachers, and staff to provide both formative and summative input related to continuous improvement efforts. These contributions can provide new ideas, approaches, and information about the impact of improvement actions. It is important to establish both formal (e.g., surveys, committees) and informal (e.g., central office staff attending school functions to engage school staff in conversation) means for collecting ongoing input. However, multiple channels of communication are only effective if the central office staff identify and diminish what Argyris and Schön (1996) refer to as defensive routines. These are actions or policies intended to protect an individual or organization by deflecting or bypassing interaction that might cause embarrassment or be a threat to the current conditions. Having such defenses only serves to “reinforce existing feelings of mistrust, cynicism, and lack of confidence in the other parties [willingness] to dialogue” (p. 100).

Continuous improvement is a dynamic process requiring constant reflection and questioning. Dialogue among school staff, among central office staff, and between the two provides opportunities to reflect and examine the process and the results of actions. Creating and sustaining a trusting and open relationship between central office and school staff is crucial to establishing open dialogue. Without such a climate, individuals at all levels may be unwilling to honestly share ideas, efforts, feelings, and concerns. Central office staff must model risk-taking behavior and open communication to foster a district climate of trust. When central office staff publicly acknowledge what they plan to do differently and then give evidence of change, they demonstrate that they, too, are engaged in improvement. By asking for school staff feedback about the enactment of roles and the



results of actions, central office staff model inquiry and risk-taking. Over time, this creates a safe environment for principals and teachers to communicate openly about their continuous improvement efforts.

By completing Try It Outs 1 and 2, you have documented your district's espoused theory of action, improvement structures, the curricular areas they address, the intended implementer(s), accompanying resources, and the role of the central office staff in supporting implementation. In the next chapter, we explore the context that both shapes the school improvement structures and defines central office staff roles and functions.