Districts can make a difference

A colleague of mine, in charge of curriculum and instruction in her district, launched a thorough and thoughtful evaluation of her program. Despite a powerful, centralized professional development program that included coaching and support, she was confounded with the reality that the quality of change and improvement still varied wildly from school to school within the district. The principals' and teachers' capacity in each building seemed to dictate their ability to use the resources the district made available.

Every system seems to have "isolated islands of excellence" (Togneri & Anderson, 2003): Individual schools populated by incredible instructional leaders and inspiring teachers who cause high levels of learning for all their students. The challenge for district staff is how they can ensure that each school is equally ready to accept and accomplish the same goal.

In the professional learning arena, **central office staff members need to support and monitor the design of school-based professional development** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 140). This support should be provided to **principals, professional development committees, and teachers leaders**. How can a district support school-based learning? Among other things, the district needs to prepare administrators and teachers to use a variety of data to determine the focus of professional learning, to build collaboration skills and structures, to use job-embedded professional development designs, and continue to focus on long-term support for the development of new classroom-based skills. A study of district support for school-based improvement also found that central office:

Design: Staff development that improves the learning of all students uses learning strategies appropriate to the intended goal.

- Used meeting time to focus on instructional issues (not memo-driven meetings);
- Allocated financial resources to improve instruction for things such as principal and teacher leader training;
- Used external resources to fund new approaches to professional learning, such as building mentor programs, augmenting support efforts, boosting the number of teacher leaders, and providing released time for teachers to work together;
- Built networks of instructional experts across the district including teachers, principals, and central office staff;
- Purposefully built a strong cadre of teacher leaders who could provide instructional assistance;
- Redefined the role of principals to serve as instructional leaders not merely managers of their buildings; and
- Used high-quality research to inform decision making and practice (Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

Work in building district capacity provides us with good news and some cautions. Developing the capacity of the whole system for instructional improvement is possible. But this work does not happen without deliberate effort and focus. The work includes redefining everyone's role — not only the principal's role but also that of central office staff, superintendent, and school board members. District staff also found that their current structural features did not easily support new approaches to collaboration and professional development.

The changes required in each school building can be accomplished but not without the deliberate and focused effort of central office staff. Districts can make a difference.

Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003)

Read more about NSDC's standards at www.nsdc.org/standards/index.cfm.

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