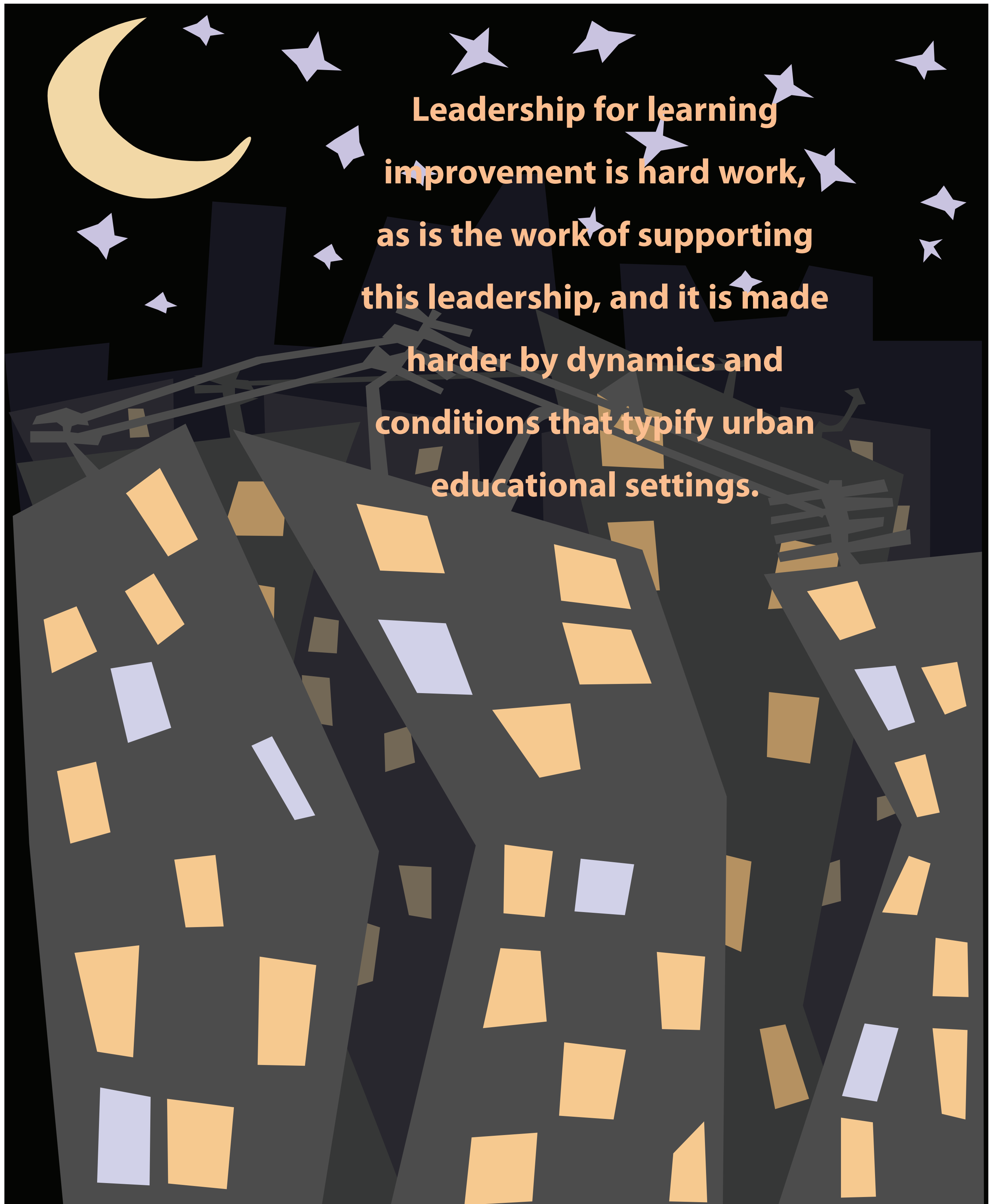
Leadership for learning improvement is hard work, as is the work of supporting this leadership, and it is made harder by dynamics and conditions that typify urban educational settings.

URBAN RENEWAL

THE URBAN SCHOOL LEADER TAKES ON A NEW ROLE

By Michael S. Knapp, Michael A. Copland, Meredith I. Honig, Margaret L. Plecki, and Bradley S. Portin

It's a familiar story: A cycle of mutually reinforcing and often self-defeating conditions shapes the schooling of young people in the nation's cities. A diverse and historically underserved student population struggles with academic learning and social adjustment in a context of limited resources. Support for staff efforts or special student needs is also limited, making it harder to attract and retain qualified staff, thereby reducing the morale of the staff who do remain — all feeding a continuing pattern of chronic low performance. Then locate this cycle in the crucible of high-stakes accountability and a press for learning improvement that has wide backing from the public. While well-intended, such pressures may not always have the desired effect of motivating and producing greater effort and higher achievement.

The situation creates a major challenge for school and district leaders, who are central to the learning improvement process and who are striving to cope, intervene productively, and even thrive in this situation. Many of these leaders are rising to the occasion by bringing concentrated energy and resources to bear on the improvement of instruction, either through direct interaction with teachers or by working more indirectly to guide, direct, and support instructional improvement. These efforts raise important questions:

Given the conditions that educators must contend

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with in such settings, what does the attempt to improve teaching and learning imply for the work of leaders within schools, central office staff, and for others who contribute to the system of public education?

What are the implications for the way leaders' work is supported?

One source of answers comes from a close look at schools and districts that are making progress, by varying local definitions that include measures of student learning. With support from The Wallace Foundation, the authors have conducted recent research that examines such schools and districts, and the findings of these studies substantially add to our insight into the urban educational leadership challenge.

There were unmistakable signs that these systems were announcing and embracing an idea of learning improvement.

This coordinated set of studies — collectively referred to as the Study of Leadership for Learning Improvement — closely examined leadership aimed at learning improvement in urban schools and districts. All relied heavily on qualitative inquiry strategies, conducted during the 2007-08 school year and beginning of the next, through repeated visits to a small number of districts and selected schools within them. The studies investigated leadership for learning improvement and how it is supported, from three vantage points:

- The investment of staffing and other resources in support of learning improvement and the enhancement of equity (Plecki et al., 2009).
- The configuration and exercise of distributed instructional leadership within the school (Portin et al., 2009).
- The transformation of central office work practices and district-school relationships to develop and sustain instructional leadership capacity (Honig et al., 2010).

The studies examined these matters in overlapping critical case samples — sites that were proactively addressing leadership for learning improvement.

The three studies shared two district sites (Atlanta Public Schools and the New York City/ Empowerment Schools Organization), along with selected schools in these districts. (All schools in New York City choose to be part of one of 14 school support organizations, the segment of the district central office that offers the most direct support to the school. We concentrated our research on the largest of these organizations, the Empowerment Schools Organization, which subsumes approximately 500 schools, or nearly a third of the city's schools.) Each study added one or two other sites and selected schools that offered useful contrasting windows on the study focus. While different from one another, the sites shared a press for improvement, the presence of promising practices and structures, and some evidence that progress was being made in student learning.

INSIGHTS ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP SUPPORT

Four themes capture central ideas across the three studies of leadership for learning improvement and the conditions that enable it. School and district leaders in these sites:

1. Focused persistently and publicly on equitable and powerful teaching, learning, and instructional improvement;
2. Invested in and expanded an instructional leadership cadre within and across schools through targeted investments, restructuring, and the reconfiguration of staff roles;
3. Actively reinvented leadership work practice, especially between school and district central office; and
4. Paid explicit, sustained attention to leadership support at all levels.

THEME 1

Place a persistent, public focus on improvement goals that maximize the quality and equity of instruction.

There were unmistakable signs that these systems embraced learning improvement. Consider the words of a new 3rd-grade teacher in a New York City school, barely into her seventh week of a teaching career:

"OK, the priorities for learning. I believe that, well, first of all, in terms of subject, I believe reading, writing, and math are the utmost importance for the school. I believe that [the leadership team] speaks about differentiating our instruction to reach all kinds of learners, no matter what level they are at and no matter how they learn, what modality they learn by. We really want to collect data, make sure that everything is assessment-based so that we can see where they stand and what progress, if any, they are making. That is pretty much what I have been told by the school, which I think is exactly what we need to do…"

This teacher owed much of her sense of direction to her school's leadership team. She had internalized a larger systemwide message the leaders had also internalized and owned: that the learning of each child mattered and should be approached in a way that addressed that particular student's learning needs in a way that could demonstrate what progress was being made and what needed to be addressed next.

This district, as in others we studied, was actively promoting these ideas about the improvement of teaching and learning. A member of a school reform team in Atlanta — the central office unit positioned to serve a network of schools — described her work with school principals:

"I … spend time in [schools] helping the principals … focus their work … working on the quality of teaching and learning, looking at the student work, looking at the rigor, looking at best practices, giving them feedback. [If I don't] … it's not going to pay out in dividends in the student achievement … So taking principals who have not spent time in their classrooms and getting them to shift their focus takes a lot of work, intentional work. And then to be able to maintain that focus in a culture where

people are used to sending you kids and keeping you in an office to deal with this one [student] all day — that's a whole other level of work … . And then helping people to prioritize their time, so that they do spend their time on the core business in the areas that matter the most."

This kind of attention directed at the improvement of teaching and learning was pervasive in the sites we studied.

At the building level, we may have a job (of principal) that's not doable, a matter of the greatest concern right now. We have to look at what it takes to be a strong leader in schools.

THEME 2

Invest in and expand the instructional leadership cadre within and across schools.

Building a systemwide approach to improving teaching and learning means more than guiding the work of school principals. A striking feature of the schools and districts studied was that many educators were exercising instructional leadership. These educators were generally organized in teams and occupied a variety of positions within a single school or across networks of schools.

Within schools, this instructional leadership cadre brought the efforts of principal, assistant principals, and department or grade-level team heads together with instructional coaches, teacher mentors, instructional leadership specialists, and assessment coordinators aimed at instructional support for classroom teachers. Across schools, staff in new or newly repurposed central office positions — administrators who acted as instructional leadership directors, such as the school reform team staff noted above or network leaders in the New York City/Empowerment Schools Organization, as well as others in more traditional positions — directed their energy to the instructional improvement taking place in schools.

Establishing or expanding the instructional leadership cadre implied several different kinds of leadership work at school and district levels. Principals and district leaders invested staffing resources strategically in instructional support arrangements, with an eye to sustaining an equity agenda, as much by reallocating existing resources as by bringing in new resources. Roles and structures within schools and the central office were reconfigured, especially in the intermediary units that work most directly with the schools, but others as well. District and school actions laid the groundwork for instructional leadership teams in schools.

THEME 3

Reinvent leadership work practice in schools and districts.

Establishing or expanding the instructional leadership cadre implied a fundamental shift and rethinking of the leaders' work. These shifts reflect both a leadership response to a demanding environment and a deeper engagement with powerful processes of professional learning.

In schools, principals and other supervisory leaders found themselves taking on several new kinds of leadership work, in addition to forms of instructional leadership that have long been recognized. For some, finding ways to put more time into conventional forms of instructional leadership (such as teacher supervision, informal one-on-one interactions with teachers, and participation in professional development) was a significant step forward. But for others, the instructional leadership work of the school meant:

- Creating and working through an instructional leadership team;
- Normalizing the instructional improvement work of teacher leaders and other nonsupervisory staff in the school;
- Anchoring instructional improvement activities to data, evidence, and inquiry of various kinds; and
- Building robust professional accountability systems within the school that responded to external demands such as federal/state accountability requirements while preserving a focus on school priorities and learning improvement agenda.

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For their part, teacher leaders and others in nonsupervisory positions were engaging in related practices — among them, connecting with teachers and instructional improvement issues through data and inquiry and navigating the middle ground between classrooms and school leaders.

Though not school-based, educators in the district central office — especially those newly positioned to work directly and continuously with the schools — engaged school principals and others in relationships aimed at improving instructional leadership. Especially in districts that had initiated a central office transformation process, specific practices in these relationships included:

- Focusing the relationship on the principal's instructional leadership as joint work or a shared common challenge;
- Modeling instructional leadership thinking and action;
- Developing and using particular tools to support principals' engagement in instructional leadership;
- Brokering external resources to help principals focus on their instructional leadership; and
- Helping all principals become leadership resources for each other.

For most staff in these districts, these practices represented new lines of work as a systemwide approach to improving instructional practice.

THEME 4

Give explicit attention to leadership support at all levels.

Schools and districts that made progress on a learning improvement agenda actively guided and supported leaders' work. Rather than assuming that all who were in position to exercise instructional leadership knew how to do this work or would be able to do it without ongoing assistance, these schools and districts had taken steps to provide leaders at every level a system of supports for instructional leadership work.

Within schools, the support system might consist of teacher leaders' regular access to peer-alike colleagues, regular occasions for instruction leadership team members to problem solve, or more focused mentoring relationships. Growing relationships between central office and the school provided ongoing supports for school principals especially, but also for other school-based staff involved in instructional leadership work. And for central office staff, a variety of actions, structures, and practices supported the work of the instructional leadership directors, while also reinforcing instructional leadership at the school level, among them:

The pattern of leadership support we observed was intimately connected to leadership for learning improvement.

- Professional development and other forms of assistance for instructional leadership directors;
- Reorganization and reculturing of other central office units to support partnerships between central office and principals;
- Stewardship of the overall central office transformation process through the relentless sponsorship of executive leaders, systems that held everyone in the central office accountable for the new work, and the brokering of external resources and relationships to support improvement efforts; and
- Evidence use throughout the central office to support continual improvement of work practices and relationships with schools.

In practical terms, these practices provided different kinds of support: direction and rationale for leadership work, direct technical help and teaching, material and intellectual resources, personal and emotional help, and sponsorship.

HOPE AND THE HARD WORK AHEAD

The pattern of leadership support we observed was intimately connected to leadership for learning improvement. Leadership support is itself leadership, and it is necessarily distributed among various people, situations, and interactions at different levels of the system. Taken together, these activities are plausibly related to improving student learning, though studies such as these cannot offer definitive causal proof.

Participants at all levels face a steep learning curve, in part because changes in work practice are not minor incremental adjustments, but rather fundamental shifts in how teachers leaders, principals, and central office administrators do their daily work.

Leadership for learning improvement is hard work, as is the work of supporting this leadership, and it is made harder by dynamics and conditions that typify urban educational settings. Our analyses underscore several aspects of the effort to support leadership for learning improvement that will continue to challenge education leaders, especially under the conditions that prevail in many urban settings. In particular, participants at all levels face a steep learning curve, in part because changes in work practice are not minor incremental adjustments, but rather fundamental shifts in how teachers leaders, principals, and central office administrators do their daily work. Pursuing these matters with an equity agenda in mind adds other resistances, from both inside and outside the school system, with which leaders must contend. Successfully meeting these resistances and staying the course while leaders learn new ways of doing business presume a modicum of stability in key leadership positions. Stable superintendents, among others, are a key source of the sponsorship that leadership for learning improvement entails. And doing all these things in the context of an economic downturn presents major obstacles that call for creativity and adaptability.

The sites we studied had made headway on most of these matters, and their successes should be attributed, in part, to their ability to develop and sustain conditions that enable leadership to prosper. Their examples offer hope and images of possibility for the future of teaching, learning, and leadership in schools.

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Michael S. Knapp (mknapp@u.washington.edu) is professor, educational leadership & policy studies and director, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, College of Education, University of Washington.

Michael A. Copland (mcopland@u.washington.edu) is senior fellow, Center for Educational Leadership, and chair and associate professor, educational leadership & policy studies at the College of Education, University of Washington.

Meredith I. Honig (mihonig@u.washington.edu) is associate professor, educational leadership & policy studies at the College of Education, senior fellow, Center for Educational Leadership, and adjunct associate professor of public affairs, University of Washington.

Margaret L. Plecki (mplecki@u.washington.edu) is associate professor, educational leadership & policy studies at the College of Education, University of Washington.

Bradley S. Portin (bportin@uwb.edu) is professor and director, education program, University of Washington-Bothell. ■