

## Q&A with **Beverly Hall**

# A NEW DEFINITION IN ATLANTA

**Superintendent's efforts  
focus on creating a central  
office that serves the schools,  
not vice versa**

By Tracy Crow

**J**SD: In today's large urban school systems, how does the central office best support a focus on teaching and learning that helps all students? How have roles changed over the last several years?

**Hall:** I don't think we have any other choice but to re-create our central offices because principals clearly must focus on instruction. They must spend the majority of their time supporting teaching and learning. The old central offices never allowed for that kind of focus. The 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 — those days are long gone. If you listen to principals and if you're going to be fair when you're holding them accountable for student results, you've got to make it so that central offices

are redesigned to “flip the script,” as we say here in Atlanta Public Schools. 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 and what's best for students without worrying constantly about meeting the needs of a central bureaucracy. I just don't see how today, in an era of high-stakes accountability and where there is a need to educate students to high standards, we can remain barriers to students' success. We've got to be a contributing factor. That's why we have to redesign our central offices.

### **TRANSFORMING THE FUNCTIONS OF THE CENTRAL OFFICE**

When I came to Atlanta as superintendent, now almost 11 years ago, in surveying our principals, they said what principals have been saying since I was a principal: We spend too much time on operations, adminis-

## BEVERLY HALL

**B**everly Hall has been superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools since 1999. Before coming to Atlanta, Hall was state district superintendent of Newark Public Schools, deputy chancellor for instruction of New York City Public Schools, superintendent of Community School District 27 in New York City, and a principal in Brooklyn.

Hall chairs Harvard University's Urban Superintendents Program Advisory Board, mentoring doctoral candidates. She is a member of the board of trustees of The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Smart Government Advisory Board of the Center for American Progress.

In 2009, Hall was elected to serve a one-year term as secretary-treasurer of the Council of the Great City Schools. Hall has received numerous honors and awards, and in 2009 was named National Superintendent of the Year by the American Association of School Administrators, as well as State Superintendent of the Year by the Georgia School Superintendents Association.

Hall earned a Doctor of Education degree from Fordham University and obtained a Master of Science in Guidance and Counseling from The City University of New York and a Bachelor of Arts in English from Brooklyn College.



In Atlanta Public Schools, we decided to look at how we were going to reorganize the central office so that we could 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. Even though they are geographically dispersed throughout the city, school reform teams function very differently from the old traditional area offices. School reform teams have an executive director, equivalent to an associate superintendent or assistant superintendent, who is responsible for a group of schools. The school reform teams serve as a one-stop shop staffed by a team of professionals who serve the cluster of schools within a specific geographic area. The school reform teams provide not just oversight, which is clearly a component of their responsibilities, but they also provide support, and we believe that's key. They're supposed to remove barriers by linking principals to facilities, human resources,

**Beverly Hall is working to change the central office in Atlanta to a service unit.**

trative tasks, responding to e-mails — not instructional matters. The research indicates that if principals don't provide the instructional leadership, clearly the schools won't perform so that students can be educated at high levels. So we had the research saying one thing, and then we had the old way of working, requiring principals to do more noninstructional tasks than instructional tasks.

transportation, nutrition, and other critical support services that help the schools run efficiently. Within each of the school reform teams, there are what we call “critical connectors” who facilitate the needs of the schools in those particular business-operational areas, again, so that the principals can provide instructional leadership. Atlanta went from being top-down — where we in the central office determine what the schools need and tell them to do it, and then pile things on top of them — to creating bottom-up decision making. The district has become a more student-centered, school-focused environment through the school reform teams.

The school reform teams also facilitate job-embedded professional development and provide all of the professional learning resources that are necessary so that teacher practice can improve and students can learn. We have within each school reform team model teacher leaders for the various content areas: literacy, math, science, social studies, and special education. Model teacher leaders are experts who go to the schools and provide support for teachers and principals so they can improve their practice and focus on teaching and learning.

#### SUPPORTING SCHOOLS THROUGH STRATEGIC PLANNING

We also created a strategy and development office. That office manages the balanced scorecard, which cascades throughout the central office. The balanced scorecard spells out our annual objectives, performance measures, as well as strategic initiatives for students and stakeholders. The balanced scorecard forces each central office employee to evaluate his or her work against the question, “How does my work support students, schools, and instruction?” It’s a strategic plan, and strategic planning is the way we operate. We plan and execute all of our major systems initiatives, and we use project management methodology and cross-functional teaming.

So, for example, instead of a room full of curriculum and instructional staff planning a literacy project or major professional development that could later be stalled by various human resource, financial, or facilities concerns, as well as a lack of understanding about what the schools really need, each system project is staffed at the outset with cross-functional or departmental teams representing all of the district functions. Everybody’s in the room talking about this initiative so that at the end of the day, every-

body knows what his or her department is required to contribute — and why — to the success of the initiative.

We also have placed in our larger schools the equivalent of a business manager position. The Wallace Foundation did some research on this approach to show how much more time is gained for the principals in terms of focusing on instruction. In our schools, 85% of the principal’s evaluation is linked to instructional leadership. We can’t hold principals accountable for instruction if we don’t provide them the opportunity and support to get the job done. So those are some of the ways in which we have really changed the language of central office functions to better service the schools.

**JSD: We just completed a leadership issue of *JSD* that was sponsored by The Wallace Foundation, so we had a chance to learn about school administration managers (SAMs). Why has it taken so long to come up with that idea of a business manager to support a principal?**

**Hall:** I think it has to do with resources — clearly, there’s a cost factor — and we didn’t have data to really demonstrate concretely how much you gain. And the fact that Wallace came in — actually, Atlanta was one of the systems that the foundation used in order to collect the data — and we were able to go to our board and show that indeed the principals did get more time to focus on instruction, then we could justify the cost. I think that’s certainly a part of it.

There is also the old image of the principal. When I was a principal in New York City, the high school principal was really a tough manager. He was kind of the operations guy; he walked around with a lot of keys; and his role was never viewed to be one of an instructional leader. He was managing the environment, both in terms of managing the discipline aspects of the school but also dealing with the business operations of the building. Now we have come a long way from that.

**JSD: What have these changes in the central office meant for your role as superintendent?**

**Hall:** My role is to really keep a focus on accelerating the progress of the district, and to make sure that we’re removing all the barriers that would get in the way of students not only meeting but exceeding standards. Another priority is more students graduating from high school as well as more students finishing college successfully. And my third priority is to make sure that we proceed with the work of putting an effective teacher in every classroom. We want to make sure we’re adequately compensating teachers and providing them with career opportunities and meaningful professional development so that they can bring about the kind of learning that we need in classrooms.

My role is to make sure that the things that stand in the way of us getting these top priorities accomplished are removed. So I meet with my principals in small groups periodically, and I ask them, “How are we supporting you?” I have my senior staff sit

#### BEVERLY HALL’S TOP 3

1. Accelerate the progress of the district. Remove barriers to students meeting and exceeding standards.
2. Increase numbers of students graduating from high school and finishing college successfully.
3. Put an effective teacher in every classroom; provide adequate compensation, career opportunities, and meaningful professional development.

in the room, but they do not interact because I don't want them to feel they have to be defensive or the principals to feel they can't be frank. I ask, "What's working? What can we do better? Are there things that are really getting in your way?" The principals are free to talk about whatever the issues are. If we had taped these conversations from my first year, when I began these meetings, you would have heard a lot about human resource issues and facilities issues and IT issues, with very little discussion on teaching and learning. Today, you may hear one or two concerns about a business area, but 95% of the conversation is about what we can do to get more students to exceed standards, to get more students better prepared for college, and, of course, to deal with the issue of an effective teacher in every classroom every day.

**JSD: How do you make teacher effectiveness a priority?**

**Hall:** The Gates Foundation just gave us \$10 million to intensify the work we're doing around effective teaching in every

classroom. We're looking at a new evaluation instrument, an electronic tool called the teacher effectiveness dashboard, to identify those things that would allow teachers, principals, and central office support personnel to look and know which teachers are highly effective, which ones are average, which ones have poor performance, what professional development has been offered, and what other types of professional development we need to offer. The

new evaluation instrument will help principals support teachers and ultimately students. The Gates grant is going to help us to really move the needle on teacher effectiveness.

**JSD: So how about professional development?**

**Hall:** We have invested tremendously in job-embedded professional development. We employ instructional experts, facilitators, mentors, coaches, and model teacher leaders, and their sole job is to work in schools, building teachers' knowledge and using data to adjust and improve instruction. An education resource strategist came in and did a comparative study of Atlanta Public Schools, at the Gates Foundation's expense. The study concluded that our investment in our coaches, mentors, and others is really what has contributed significantly to the improvements that we're seeing.

Again, we also have at the school reform team level model teacher leaders. They perform demonstration lessons, model effective instructional practices, co-teach, conduct observations, and give feedback in a nonevaluative way. And they help teach-

ers in planning, using data, and using benchmark and formative assessments. So we invest a lot, even providing professional development for model teacher leaders, mentors, and coaches so that they can be on top of their craft as they work with our teachers. We have worked hard to make sure that our schools have common planning time, whether it's horizontally, vertically, or both, depending on the level, whether elementary, middle, or high school. Teachers come together as a professional learning community using data and student work to talk about instructional practice, to learn from each other, and to learn from the coaches and mentors.

You can go into just about any school in Atlanta, and you'll find that these aspects of professional development are all operational there. We have consistently supported professional development every year, even with the budget crisis. We provide an instructional management system that we've been implementing over time, very costly, that allows teachers to access model lessons, benchmark testing, and formative assessments because we want them to be able to differentiate instruction and understand what best teaching practice looks like even as they're teaching and implementing right there in the classroom.

**JSD: How about leadership development? How do you bring up effective leaders?**

**Hall:** I came through the ranks, starting as a middle school English teacher a long, long time ago. I went into the principalship because I realized that unless I had an effective leader in the building, I was never going to be able to maximize my potential to teach. So when I came to Atlanta, I decided that I really needed to look at principal leadership. Over the past decade, more than 90% of the principals have been changed. Many people resigned or retired, and others just moved on. Initially, we had to recruit from outside to fill those positions. We decided we had to cast a huge net in order to get applicants who fulfilled the requirements for a principalship as we defined it. However, we also received support from The Wallace Foundation to start our own formal induction and leadership development program — the Superintendent's Academy for Building Leaders in Education. This program provides an intensive two-year experience to groom internal aspiring leaders who want to serve as principals in Atlanta. Many of our current principals are coming from that pool, and we're happy because they're very instructionally focused. They understand the kind of leadership that we require to move our schools.

So making sure we have this pathway to leadership is one example of our work to build leadership capacity.

Secondly, we continue to cultivate current principals as instructional leaders, and I can give you an example.

When several elementary school principals were expressing difficulty getting a larger percentage of students to exceed standards, they assembled a professional learning team to review the research, to identify best practices that would assist them in helping teachers redesign instruction. At another school, principals

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decided that they would participate in instructional rounds. During the rounds, the principals observed that students were not being asked higher-level thinking questions, so the principals sat down and, question by question, they worked together to make recommendations for how teachers could challenge students to do analysis and evaluation rather than simply recording facts. So the principals are forming their own professional learning communities so that they can improve student outcomes and their skills as instructional leaders.

Furthermore, through our Effective Teacher in Every Classroom Initiative, we're empowering principals to be good human capital managers so they will be using the teacher effectiveness dashboard that I mentioned earlier.

Doing so will allow them to make data-driven, clear, human capital decisions to support their teachers. The teacher evaluation dashboard will have multidimensional performance data — that is, student test scores, teacher assignments, teacher evaluation data, and the various components of the teacher's contribution to student growth. The idea is for all of that data to be used to decide intervention strategies. And it will also allow, I believe, for deeper conversations between teacher and principal with continuous improvement for the teacher being the ultimate goal. The principals are very excited that our district is piloting the teacher evaluation dashboard in several schools.

**JSD: What words of wisdom would you share with aspiring leaders within and beyond your district?**

**Hall:** There's no question that as a leader, you have to surround yourself with very competent and talented people. This whole notion of a superhero doing everything and being capable of moving large systems is flawed. You have to have a team that has bought into the vision that you articulate, but they must also be extremely knowledgeable and competent themselves, and leaders in their own right. And I always say to people, "Be sure to surround yourself with the right team if you're going to get the job done." If you're to survive as a leader who does anything worthwhile, you also have to have political savvy with a small "p." I don't care how knowledgeable and competent you are, if you can't stay long enough to get anything done, then nothing will change. So you have to be able to understand the political dynamics as well as the cultural dynamics of wherever you are. Otherwise, you will be distracted by continuous turmoil and not able to focus on teaching and learning and moving the system so that students can perform better.

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