

# THE CAN-DO CENTRAL OFFICE

**WITH AN EYE ON STUDENT  
ACHIEVEMENT, ILLINOIS DISTRICT  
REDEFINES ITS ROLES AND GOALS**

**By Deanne Hillman and Donald S. Kachur**

**T**o the leadership of almost any school district and its supporting staff, the educational challenges are clear: 1) Reduce the achievement gap among students; 2) increase the graduation rate; and 3) attain the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) mandated by No Child Left Behind. Facing a superintendent change in 2006-07, Decatur Public School District 61 in Illinois was already confronting the major challenges of a widening student achievement gap, increasing dropout rate, and schools not meeting AYP. Located in the central part of the state, District 61 is a midsize urban district serving approximately 8,600 students pre-K through 12th grade in 22 building sites.

From the beginning, Superintendent Gloria J. Davis professed several simple beliefs that resonated among all district staff: “We understand all of our children can learn and achieve at high levels. It is our responsibility,

as a district, to do all we can to help them reach those high levels. All of our children can learn, and we can teach them!”

However, it was going to take more than words to turn such beliefs into realities for schools. It would call for transforming the roles and functions of the central office to form a consistent, systemic partnership with schools across the district. Together, schools and the central office would establish a clear directive for teaching and learning that would generate the initiatives and efforts to make the district’s vision a reality. This transformation called for the central office to take the lead in building the capacity of all staff to make sound decisions about their own ongoing professional learning that would impact student learning and achievement (Killion, 2006, p. 249).

#### **A TRANSFORMED VIEW OF THE CENTRAL OFFICE**

To begin, the district reviewed how the central of-





office offered professional development to schools. In collaboration with the schools, the central office realized that it needed to:

- Provide a more focused and compelling districtwide vision for all schools;
- Allow professional development needs to be identified at the building level;
- Provide leadership and support, differentiated at the building level, for continuous improvement of all professional staff;
- Work with individual schools in data-informed decision making; and
- Measure the progress of students and the school resulting from professional development.

The district needed a culture change. The central office saw the need to move from a managerial or compliance orientation of directives and controls to a service orientation in support of students, teachers, and administrators (Honig & Copland, 2008, p. 3). Staff

realized they would focus on and facilitate the improvement of instruction by offering opportunities and support for ongoing professional learning at the building level. The central office would develop greater visibility, accessibility, and resourceful responsiveness to school-level professional learning needs. Principals and teachers would need to know that they could request and expect central office staff to respond to their needs for professional learning.

The district began the change process by reorganizing central office staff and redefining roles and relationships. The central office administration became a collaborative team of

district facilitators. They shifted priorities to focus major attention on teaching and learning rather than noninstructional responsibilities. The director of teaching and learning became responsible for overseeing quality professional development aimed at building leadership capacity in all administrators and teachers as instructional and curriculum leaders. The director was also responsible for overseeing a continuous improvement process that ensured the alignment of professional development with curriculum and instruction activities.

To accomplish a central office service orientation, District 61 established a district leadership team that included 15 central office administrators. The district leadership team, a high-performing, goal-oriented team that provided vision and direction for the district, served in an advisory capacity

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to the superintendent. Working with building-level leadership, members of the team held weekly three-hour meetings analyzing issues and providing information, support, and solutions to building administrators. The team provided input in strategic planning and decision making; guided administrators by using clear, timely communication; improved academic achievement by participating in and supporting decisions at the district level; and monitored building-level administrators. The goal of the district leadership team was to build leadership capacity at the central level to effectively support building leadership and ensure student success at the school level.

Central office administrators were spending significantly more time serving as consultants and collaborating members of school improvement teams. They were responsible for building relationships and working full-time with school principals to support their work in improving teaching and learning and addressing professional learning needs of building staff. Central office and building-level administrators were now working alongside each other on a frequent basis. Together, they learned and worked through issues and addressed the challenges in each school to improve teaching and learning.

### CREATING A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

Many researchers in professional development call for an increased emphasis on job-embedded and collaborative teacher learning. As part of and in addition to formal professional development opportunities, the literature increasingly describes how teachers learn by working with their colleagues in professional learning communities, engaging in continuous dialogue, and examining their practices and student performance to develop and enact more effective instructional practices (Hord, 2009, pp. 40-43). In order to provide opportunities for educators to share their experiences and knowledge, District 61's central office administrators guided and supported individual schools in evolving as professional learning communities. The model enabled each school staff to undertake learning practices that included observing, analyzing, and learning from each other and from school data and student work. The director of teaching and learning provided support, guidance, and resources for the development of these learning communities. During this past year, three full days on the district calendar were dedicated to districtwide professional development for the communities. Included were three professional learning com-

munity support team sessions designed to build leadership capacity at each building.

### CENTRAL OFFICE AND DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS AS LEARNERS

Emphasizing the importance of quality instruction, all principals, assistant principals, and central office administrators whose duties included curriculum leadership were required to participate in walk-throughs. The district envisioned the instructional walk-through process as a tool to maximize the administrator's time in the classroom as an instructional leader, provide a vehicle to assess effectiveness of curricular and instructional initiatives, and help with monitoring the school's climate. For central office personnel in particular, walk-throughs were an opportunity to observe and examine data and see firsthand the needs of individual schools. Through this process, central office staff moved closer to the schools so new relationships could occur and participants could increase their capacity as instructional leaders (Agullard & Goughnour, 2006, p. 8). Furthermore, the district used walk-throughs as a vehicle to promote embedded professional development. This resulted in conversations with staff members about improvements in teaching and learning and practices in data gathering and reflective thinking.

Data from walk-throughs helped generate in-depth discussions with the building-level staff on instructional strategies. The data helped educators pinpoint instructional changes they needed to make. District administrators centered their instructional walk-through process on the three components of effective classroom teaching from *The Art and Science of Teaching* (Marzano, 2007). The district made student learning the priority by focusing on effective instructional, curriculum design, and management strategies.

To best support building-level learning priorities, central office staff strived to become a valuable resource for all school principals. District 61 developed a new administrator program to build capacity and provide direct support to all incoming administrators. Each administrator works with a mentor during his or her first year and attends monthly professional learning sessions designed to meet his or her needs. Principals found value in having support from colleagues who had experience as principals at the same school level as their own.

In addition, central office administrators learned new skills in order to be effective facilitators. As learners themselves, they have developed their knowledge and skills in collaborative planning and facilitation as well as their ability to conduct effective meetings.

### BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF ALL SCHOOL STAFF

The primary focus of the central office was promoting learning across the entire district — meaningful learning opportunities for students, teachers, building-level administrators, and central office staff. Central office staff worked in collaboration

#### Decatur School District #61

Decatur, Ill.

Grades: **Pre-K-12**

Enrollment: **8,558**

Staff: **926** certified, **318** support staff

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	<b>44.9%</b>
Black:	<b>44.6%</b>
Hispanic:	<b>1.7%</b>
Asian/Pacific Islander:	<b>0.9%</b>
Native American:	<b>0.2%</b>
Other:	<b>7.7%</b>

Limited English proficient: **0.8%**

Languages spoken: **English, Spanish**

Free/reduced lunch: **65.7%**

Special education: **18%**

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with each school’s professional learning communities to assure that each school identified, planned, and participated in professional development that increased its instructional capacity. With central office resource help and logistical assistance, each school’s faculty based professional learning decisions for all staff on individual school data. Each school developed a professional development plan that aligned with the district improvement plan and school improvement plan. Emphasis for professional learning concentrated on:

- Practicing differentiated instruction;
- Creating common assessments; and
- Implementing instructional interventions.

The central office served as a resource to individual buildings and customized professional development for specific building contexts and needs. Across the district, professional learning became job-embedded and ongoing rather than one-shot professional development workshops or sessions.

A range of leaders — consultants, instructional specialists, literacy coaches, administrators, and teacher leaders — facilitated the professional development.

#### COACHING MODEL

Central office staff supported coaching across the district. Literacy coaches worked in elementary buildings, while instructional specialists offered support to staff districtwide. Forty staff members participated in a five-day learning opportunity with NSDC on coaching in order to build capacity in district resource and support systems. They acquired the knowledge, skills, and practices to improve teaching strategies. Consultants followed up the initial training with school visits for three days to offer feedback and support. The coaching model placed particular emphasis on adult learning theory, data analysis, critical conversations, building relationships, providing research-based instructional strategies, coaching through differentiation, problem solving, and building positive school cultures.

• **Graduation rates were 73.3% in 2007, 87.9% in 2009.**

• **80% of graduating seniors go to college.**

• **13% of the schools are on the Illinois honor roll.**

#### LESSONS LEARNED

All school districts’ central offices face the challenge of how to provide consistent excellence in their approaches to supporting professional development. District 61 learned that its central office should:

- Build the capacity of central office administrators in facilitating new forms of professional development;
- Develop partnerships for collaboration between the central office and schools that reflect movement from a “working on” to a “working with” mentality;
- 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; and

- 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.
- The ultimate goal of the central office transformation was to build the capacity of all faculty and staff through professional development to offer a quality education and accept responsibility to meet the needs of a diverse population.

The district has experienced some early success through this transformation. Graduation rates have increased to 87.9% in 2009, up from 73.3% in 2007. Eighty percent of the graduating seniors are moving on to higher education. Thirteen percent of the Decatur Public Schools are on the Illinois Honor Roll, recognizing high-quality education for all students. Also, the Decatur Public School District 61 was recognized by the Illinois State Board of Education as third in the top 10 award-winning districts for student performance in the state of Illinois.

The key to District 61’s success was not to capitulate to pressures to return to the former modus operandi as a central office. Beginning at the superintendent’s level, the district continually reinforced efforts to transform the central office to become instrumental in creating a districtwide collaborative professional learning culture, one where educators were learning from and with one another, introducing ideas, sharing practices, and making decisions that benefit the students that pass through their doors each day.

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