



Whether a building
or a state of mind,

THE CENTRAL OFFICE MUST EVOLVE

By Hayes Mizell

The central office is both a physical place and a state of mind. In some school systems, the central office is a separate building located away from schools. In other communities, the office is housed in one of the school buildings. The central office may be where members of the school board meet and even have offices. It is where the superintendent works, as do administrators most directly accountable to him or her. It is a bureaucracy, regardless of its size, that is responsible for operating the school system.

When someone mentions “central office,” they may not be referring only to the building. They may also mean the tip of the hierarchal pyramid, the place where authority resides and decisions are made. To many people, educators as well as citizens, the central office is a

mystery. The label has become the shorthand for the entity that determines what is to be done and how it is to be done in a school system; many people don’t necessarily know which individuals are responsible for which decisions or actions.

The role of central offices looms large in efforts to reform school systems and schools. Are central offices the problem or the solution? Reformers continue to debate the answer, but only in rare cases have school boards made serious efforts to establish alternative structures for administering school systems.

Central offices vary in size, organization, and function, but they endure. For all the attention to site-based decision-making and management, no one advocates comprehensive site-based administration. Even public schools with a strong streak of independence do not seek responsibility for interacting with state and federal education agencies or administering payroll, human resources, contracts, construction, transportation, pur-

chasing, and accounting. As more than one charter school founder has learned, the trade-off for controlling education functions is accepting responsibility for administrative headaches that would otherwise be those of a central office.

School systems are complex organizations, and central offices generally perform well in carrying out functions that enable the systems to operate more or less efficiently. But there is a difference between operating a school system and operating it so all students perform proficiently. It is this latter challenge that has prompted calls for a new central office. Different experts and critics have different proposals for what the new central office should look like, and it would benefit any school board or superintendent to study these proposals. Many districts already operate with a new central office approach, thanks to forward-thinking leaders and innovative administrative teams. Because this magazine focuses tightly on professional learning, the following are thoughts about how that function of the new central office could increase student achievement.

THE SUPERINTENDENT IS ESSENTIAL TO ESTABLISHING A NEW CENTRAL OFFICE

A central office reflects the philosophy, management, and priorities of the superintendent. Some superintendents favor a command-and-control approach to administering the school system, perhaps realizing they may have only three years or less before they lose their jobs. They feel under pressure to demonstrate quickly that they can positively impact the school system and improve teaching and learning. This leads them to launch new, large-scale initiatives that require new learning by veteran school administrators and teachers. It is not easy for these initiatives to take root in schools and classrooms. Schools view such initiatives as only the latest in a series of mandates by previous superintendents. Some educators respond with “here we go again” and feign compliance. Others withhold their commitment, believing “this too shall pass.” Some enthusiastically join in with the hope of genuine reform. By the time a superintendent leaves the school system, the results of his or her initiatives are likely to be mixed, at best. The school system’s educators wait for the next superintendent, the next reorganization of the central office, and the next new initiative.

When this command-and-control approach characterizes superintendents’ leadership, there will be no deep learning among rank and file educators. New superintendents must convince their school boards that highly focused, sustained professional learning is the best strategy for developing the capacities of educators

to increase student performance. Achieving that result must drive the superintendent’s organization of the central office.

THE NEW CENTRAL OFFICE PARTNERS WITH SCHOOLS RATHER THAN CONTROLS THEM

In many school systems, there is psychological as well as physical distance between the central office and individual schools. The central office focuses on maintaining the system of schools; the schools focus on managing and teaching students. Each school has a unique culture, and the same is true of the central office. The result is an us-them mentality that causes central office staff to think of themselves as having interests and priorities that are different than those of schools. Likewise, school administrators and teachers believe their work is why the school system exists, and they experience the central office as more intrusive than helpful. As long as this disconnect exists, it is students who suffer most.

When student learning is a school system’s priority, then the central office and schools will partner to achieve that result. The two entities will share accountability and they will succeed or fail together. The superintendent and his or her cabinet must be tireless in developing a culture in which students’ interests are primary, and the interests of the central office and school staff are secondary. A central office will be new when every member of its staff comes to work each day determined to help schools increase student learning. A serious performance appraisal system that assesses central office staff based on their efforts to achieve that goal can change the central office culture.

THE NEW CENTRAL OFFICE DEVELOPS SCHOOLS’ CAPACITIES TO ENGAGE EDUCATORS IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Slowly, too slowly, unproductive forms of staff development are fading away. There are central offices that still believe their role is to organize and provide professional development opportunities. With pride, some school systems compile these in a print or online catalog. A central office usually does not conceive these offerings in collaboration with a school’s administrators and teachers, though the office may conduct a survey or otherwise seek educators’ input. Instead, the professional development reflects the central office’s assessment of what school-based educators need to learn. Some educators choose to take advantage of professional

Are central offices the problem or the solution? Reformers continue to debate the answer, but only in rare cases have school boards made serious efforts to establish alternative structures for administering school systems.

development driven by the central office; others do not. In the end, the central office only knows how many educators from which schools attended each professional development session. It probably does not know whether the educators' on-the-job performance improved or increased student learning.

The National Staff Development Council's radical vision for a new kind of professional development challenges this traditional approach. NSDC calls for every educator at a school site to engage in professional learning every day. A school will organize teachers into small, collaborative teams, assign each team a skillful facilitator, and develop a new master schedule that provides time for teams to meet at least several times every week. Each team analyzes student performance data to determine what it reveals about common learning gaps that plague the team members' students. The team members then discuss what they should learn to address the students' learning needs more effectively. That will, in turn, lead the team to develop learning goals for itself, and in subsequent meetings the team will pursue the learning necessary to meet its goals. Teams will be able to work with external consultants to provide guidance and expertise.

Until now, most central offices have taken a faith-based approach to professional development.

One of the advantages of this approach is that over time, schools will become responsible for professional learning that addresses the specific needs of their students and teachers. Because this will be a continuous process, it will strengthen teacher induction and provide the schools' educators with support as they seek to apply and assess new learning.

Though some schools will take the initiative to implement this approach to professional learning, most will not ask for either permission or forgiveness. When it comes to major changes, schools take their cues from the central office. Whether and how it embraces the new approach to professional learning and partners with schools in bringing it to fruition is the first test of how new the central office really is. The new central office will not mandate schools' wholesale adoption of the approach. It will not convene a meeting of principals and introduce them to the concept. It will not announce that it is eliminating instructional coaches and substituting this system of professional learning.

Instead, the new central office will nurture the organic development of this approach, devoting the time and effort to discussing it with a few school administrators and teacher leaders whose schools have the greatest potential readiness to put this professional learning to the test. These discussions may take a year or more. The new central office will then become an implementation partner with schools that demonstrate the greatest interest in growing the approach. The central office's role will be to assist in keeping the process moving, collaborating with the school to provide intensive support and ensure quality imple-

mentation. Converting to this new approach to professional learning will take patience and time, but it will also provide the crucible for forging a new, more productive relationship between the central office and schools.

THE NEW CENTRAL OFFICE INCREASES SCHOOLS' CAPACITIES TO ASSESS THE RESULTS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Until now, most central offices have taken a faith-based approach to professional development. They devote considerable financial and human resources to the process with the hope that the performance of administrators and teachers will improve and students will ultimately benefit. They proceed on faith. If students' test scores improve, a principal or superintendent may credit professional development as one of the contributing factors, but they really do not know the relationship between professional development and student performance. They cannot provide evidence of if or how the chain of experiences from professional development to teachers' application of their learning increased student achievement.

As the new approach to professional learning evolves, it will be important to assess its impact. This will not occur unless central offices take seriously the challenge of engaging schools in learning how to assess professional learning and its results. Again, the central office will have to take the lead and provide support because developing evaluation tools to assess professional development outcomes will require time and expertise schools do not have. Traditionally, central offices have not focused on this issue, and they are likely to be as mystified as schools about how to assess professional learning. That is no reason not to begin considering it; central offices have to learn too. There is not always a roadmap for learning, and it sometimes involves mucking around, a process of broad exploration, inquiry, consultation, and research. Joellen Killion's book, *Assessing Impact* (Corwin Press, 2008), is an essential resource, and the new central offices will use it to provoke thinking and discussion about how to develop practical evaluation approaches schools will find helpful.

Though there are powerful forces responsible for central offices as we have known them, and though they have proven to be durable institutions for organizing and operating school systems, they are overdue for reform. No one should be satisfied with a central office whose real-world performance reveals it has a priority other than improving the learning of all students — and all educators.

REFERENCE

Killion, J. (2008). *Assessing impact: Evaluating staff development* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Hayes Mizell (hmizell@gmail.com) is NSDC's distinguished senior fellow. ■