

PARTNERS *at* EVERY LEVEL

FROM THE CLASSROOM TO THE BOARDROOM,
CONSULTANTS WORK TOWARD DISTRICT'S GOALS

By Andrew Lachman and Steven Wlodarczyk

As anyone in a partnership — a marriage, a business, a professional relationship — will attest, it takes hard work and energy, time and persistence, and reciprocal commitment to make a partnership successful.

Writing from the perspective of an external partner, we explore here lessons learned from eight years of working with public school districts. As an organization committed to large-scale instructional improvement, the Connecticut Center for School Change partners with six geographically and demographically diverse school districts across the state ranging in size from 2,200 to 15,000 students. Our work is informed by the concept that “system success equals student success.” The center works in partnership with district leaders to develop leadership, build organizational capacity, and enhance knowledge. Unlike many of the relationships — programmatic, commercial transactions — that districts have with external partners for professional development, our partnerships are systemic, long-term, mutually respectful relationships grounded in Learning Forward’s Standards for

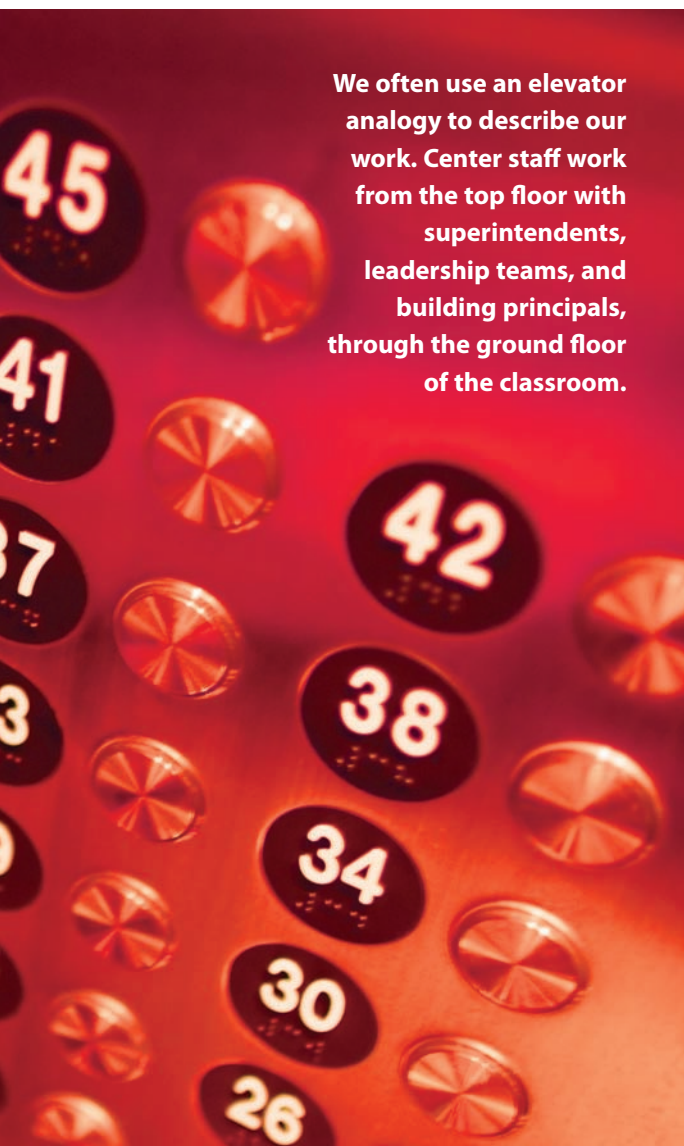


Staff Development (NSDC, 2001).

- Our partnerships are based on the beliefs that:
- Partnering and collaboration are essential skills for success in the 21st century.
 - The work of instructional improvement at scale requires collaboration and teaming across all levels of the organization and with stakeholders and external partners.
 - Schools and districts must work collaboratively in order to become high-performing systems that improve student achievement.
 - Organizations must continue to learn in order to improve and to sustain improvements in practice.

HOW PARTNERSHIPS WORK

Our theory of action regarding district partnerships is



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that a partnership will achieve improved student success, efficiency, effectiveness, and learning if we do the following:

- Identify districts that share our core beliefs and our goals for student success;
- Work with districts that are enacting a compatible theory of action;
- State explicitly our expectations for district improvement, roles and responsibilities, time and structures for joint planning and reflection; and
- Collaborate and work toward a shared outcome.

We approach our district partnerships with the overarching goal of building on their work without predetermining what the district needs. As former district administrators, the center's staff members have a high regard for school districts and their efforts to improve instructional

practice despite conflicting needs and demands, regulatory agency progress monitoring, media scrutiny, and increasingly scarce resources. We respect the district culture, context, and conditions and recognize that there is no magic bullet or single correct answer that will lead to organizational transformation and to high achievement for all students.

What does collaborative, on-site technical assistance support to districts look like in practice? The center's staff spends four to six days a month in a district, acting as advisors, thought partners, coaches, and critical friends to superintendents, assistant superintendents, senior district leadership, principals, and other staff members. Over a long-term, multiyear relationship, the center's staff works with district leaders to help them develop systemic thinking, generate theories of action, employ coherent strategies, align resources, develop and support effective leadership teams, ensure accountability, engage stakeholders, and sustain improvements. Center staff help districts address the factors that support or hinder continuous improvement: culture (beliefs and values about adult and student learning); conditions (time, structures, and schedules); and competencies (professional skills and knowledge).

The primary focus of the partnership work is the instructional core (the relationship between students, teachers, and curriculum content and the tasks students are asked to do).

In *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning*, City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel argue

that increases in student learning occur only as a consequence of improvements in the level of content, teachers' knowledge and skill, and student engagement (2009). They also suggest that changes in any one component of the instructional core require changes in the other two. Furthermore, they note that if changes — in governance, structure, funding, or the length of the school day — don't directly impact the instructional core, then they won't make a real impact on student performance.

We often use an elevator analogy to describe our work. While center staff concentrate on working on the top floor with superintendents, their leadership teams, and building principals, center staff also know that working on the ground floor, and from the classroom up to the boardroom, is important. So, it is not unusual for center staff to observe and collect evidence at a grade-level data team meeting, to coach a principal during the day, or to attend a school board meeting to respond to questions about the partnership at night.

The partnership's goal is to foster an increased sense of

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urgency about and focus on improving the learning of all students. As one superintendent put it, “What has resulted from our partnership is a much clearer understanding of the importance of growing the roots of continuous improvement deep into the organization and the very critical importance of placing the specific, desired improvement in student learning at the center of all continuous improvement strategies.”

PARTNERS IN ACTION

One specific example of our work is helping a small urban district improve the effectiveness of data teams. At the request of the superintendent, center staff collected data through observations, interviews, and surveys about how schools implemented data teams — a core component of the district’s theory of action. We found a great deal of variation in the fidelity of implementation and the quality of data team conversations within and across schools. We brought that data to the director of curriculum and the superintendent. In response to the data, the district revamped its professional development to focus on building learning communities, and transformed its administrative meetings from business to instructional purposes.

The meetings provided principals with a community of practice and professional development around a shared understanding of what high-quality data teams should look like, what the discourse should sound like, and how to use a set of tools and rubrics to monitor data teams in their buildings. Center staff provided coaching, facilitation, and critical friendship to the new structure. The district also established a stakeholder group of teachers and administrators to ensure shared ownership and engagement. To ensure that data teams were indeed focusing on instructional practices and improving student achievement, the principals instituted accountability procedures. They gained new insight into the importance of their presence at data team meetings, collected minutes, and required data team members to make commitment pledges for next steps. The principals

provided teachers with resources to become more effective in designing lessons based on data, and conversations at data team meetings became more focused on instruction.

From that and other partnership experiences with districts, we’ve learned some lessons that may help districts rethink and restructure their relationships with external partners to ensure that districts are working on the right stuff in the right ways to produce better student outcomes:

Build relationships. Entering into and sustaining a partnership is challenging work. The first order of business for part-

ners is to develop common understandings, shared language, and trust. Bryk and Schneider (2002) have demonstrated that relational trust improves program implementation and student outcomes. To be effective, external partners have to be welcomed as part of the district team. They need access to all aspects of district operations, to all levels, and to all the systems (human resources, finance, professional development, accountability, etc.) that affect organizational, adult, and student performance.

Make time. Partnerships need time for joint planning and reflection, including time to debrief what worked, what didn’t, and how it could be improved and time to revise strategies and action steps to ensure the partnership continues to add value. Time provides the connective tissue that binds the partnership together.

Develop leadership. External partners can play a role as coaches to building and central office leadership, and as facilitators and instructors of leadership development programs.

Leadership has to be broadly distributed and widely shared. There must be understanding and commitment to the work of instructional improvement from the top — the superintendent and board of education — down. Without it, it is next to impossible to achieve coherence, mobilize resources, and ensure follow-through. But at the same time, successful district partnerships support building administrators as instructional leaders and broaden leadership ranks to include teachers, teacher leaders, and staff developers.

Pursue a path. As the Cheshire Cat tells Alice in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, “If you don’t know where you want to go, then it really doesn’t matter which road you take.” Having a shared framework among partners, a common conceptual map, increases the likelihood of coherent action. It helps keep district and external partners focused, limits the number of initiatives, and concentrates effort on a few key strategies. It helps ensure that districts and external partners are heading in the same direction, working on the right work and not sidetracked by distractions that will have people traveling aimlessly. As one assistant superintendent noted, “We have been able to positively impact the quality of teaching and learning in our district using a coherent systems thinking model that provides clarity to our district, school, and teacher goals. This clarity has allowed us to sustain our focus on the instructional core, ensuring that our collective efforts result in more students learning at higher levels.”

Keep on keeping on. Districts and their external partners should plan for the long haul, commit to several years of mutual engagement, and meet at least quarterly to align their resources and monitor their efforts toward improving instruction and student learning. Changing culture (values, attitudes, be-

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liefs) and structures (roles, responsibilities, rules of engagement) is not an easy task. It takes hard work, persistence, and a commitment to continuous improvement. Changing the organization's genetic structure and getting innovations deeply embedded in the ways of doing work requires much more than a series of workshops.

There should be frequent opportunities for the district and its partners to reflect on progress and ways of improving the "how" and the "what" of the work.

Engage stakeholders. Districts and their external partners must involve multiple stakeholders and build constituencies for educational improvement both inside (with unions, parents, and boards of education) and outside (with residents, businesses, faith communities, community agencies, and government) the district. The long-term goal is sustainability. As Hill, Campbell, and Harvey have written (2000), it takes a city to ensure that educational reforms continue beyond the tenure of a superintendent, principal, or outside external partner. Shifting ownership from the central leadership team to a broad coalition of stakeholders is essential for sustainability. External partners can

help keep this issue front and center, and can provide an outside perspective on the effort.

Demand accountability. External partners and districts must be accountable for their actions and for delivering on their commitments. There should be frequent opportunities for the district and its partners to reflect on progress and ways of im-

proving the "how" and the "what" of the work. Accountability requires multiple evidence sources that mark progress (or the lack thereof) toward improving student achievement and enables the partners to reflect on lessons learned.

Transforming education and improving our public schools so that they can meet the challenges of the 21st century are not easy tasks. External partners can help schools and districts meet these challenges if they work collaboratively, effectively, and intelligently.

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