

NAVIGATION AIDS

9 SHIFTS IN PRACTICE SMOOTH THE TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO CENTRAL OFFICE

JOE SULLIVAN is a high school principal in a rural district. He and the other principals in the district received an email announcing the assistant superintendent's retirement. One of the principals forwarded the email to him with a note saying, "Here you go, man. This is your opportunity."

"Why would I want to do that?" Sullivan wondered. "I really don't want to be one of *those* administrators, do I? Is this really a path to something worthwhile and fulfilling?"

By Thomas M. Van Soelen and Debra Harden

No longer is the central office a place for educators' careers to meet a dead end. Nor can it be where ineffective leaders are transferred to lessen impact. It cannot be "the blob," as coined by William Bennett (Walker, 1987). The Wallace Foundation notes that the central office has never been more important for system and individual school improvement (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010).

Marzano, Waters, & McNulty (2005) articulated 21 responsibilities of school-level leadership, then turned their attention to the superintendency. This meta-analysis (Waters & Marzano, 2006) resulted in four major findings:

1. District-level leadership matters.
2. Effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts.
3. Superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement.
4. Effective superintendents may provide principals with "defined autonomy" — that is, setting nonnegotiable goals for learning and instruction yet allowing schools to decide how to reach those goals.

This research has informed superintendent preparation programs and evaluation processes for almost a decade. According to the Education Commission of the States, 45 states have superintendent preparation programs offered by universities, associations, or a combination of the two (Education Commission of the States, 2015). The pathway to the superintendency is commonplace.



Although other district office leaders (e.g. assistant superintendents and directors) are mentioned several times in the meta-analysis, attention to their effectiveness is often uneven and not aligned with research. Some states offer districts choices in how to evaluate leaders who are not at the building level. This often results in a hodgepodge of practices, marginalizing the possible impact of a district office leader.

As the high school principal at the beginning of this article implied, biases exist against the quality level of district office leaders. Sometimes these assumptions are well-deserved.

In 2008, the Georgia State Superintendents Association decided to take on the issue of district office leader quality. Having successfully implemented the Superintendent Professional Development Program for 18 years already, the association had both the credibility and experience to organize the effort. In fact, the association's own data argued for the program's need.

Not all graduates of the Superintendent Professional Development Program moved on to become superintendents. Program graduates said that the job was far more complex than they anticipated, and their skill sets were better matched for other work.

Debra Harden, a former Georgia superintendent and professional development director for the superintendents association, rallied a diverse statewide group to design pro-

KEY QUESTIONS

These questions and their corresponding answers were vital to the development team:

- From your previous leadership experiences, what prepared you most? What prepared you the least?
- What has been the hardest thing about this leadership post?
- What do you see as the knowing/doing gap when principals are promoted to the central office?

HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

One weekend a month for 10 months, program participants explore these shifts. Practicing superintendents and district office leaders lead them through simulations, work product construction, and examinations of their own work.

A shared text, *Leading for Results: Transforming Teaching, Learning, and Relationships in School* (Sparks, 2006), grounds the entire year. Protocols modeled through an experienced member of the School Reform Initiative build participants' prowess in leading respectful, productive processes.

At every turn, the program models Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011), with a focus on the Leadership and Learning Communities standards.

fessional learning that would result in high-quality central office leaders. The group used several sources to guide their work:

- Superintendent success criteria (Waters & Marzano, 2006);
- Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement Leader Qualities (Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement, 2012); and
- ISLLC Standards (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium, 2008).

Although each of these published standards were critical in program development, Harden's own collected data became foundational. Harden interviewed 12 superintendents who had successfully transitioned from school to district office.

As she analyzed the qualitative data, important shifts began to emerge. Just as teachers are shifting practices for

the Common Core State Standards, school and program leaders need to do the same to navigate their way successfully to the central office.

In this article, we outline the shifts in practice that need to take place to make a successful transition, using vignettes that describe real experiences by Georgia educators. Some of these stories demonstrate a successful transition; others highlight an ongoing challenge.

SHIFTING PRACTICES

The district office leader's role is to support and implement the work of the superintendent. These nine shifts create the conditions to make that happen.

1 From vertical to horizontal.

District office functions (human resources, finance, transportation, curriculum and instruction, etc.) operate across the system on a horizontal plane. Schools and other operational departments are responsible for applying many system functions within the building or department. The school leader takes a vertical approach to managing those system functions.

After 12 years as a building leader, Veronica Lewis became assistant superintendent for human resources in her district. As a building leader, she adeptly recruited and retained teachers. Once in the district office, she discovered that not all schools receive the same updates regarding new teaching applicants. She immediately saw that she must put processes in place to ensure that all schools, not just her former school, are treated fairly and equitably.

2 From micro (system) to macro (systemic).

The school or program leader operates in a microcosm within the district — a system within a system. The operation and implementation of district initiatives focus chiefly on activities and processes that implement school and district goals. A district office leader operates in a macro system made up of all schools and functions of the district. The operation and implementation of district initiatives focus on systemic implications for the district as a whole.

Suzanne Wheeler was a highly respected building leader. Her school was organized, activities were well-planned, and the adults and students were clear regarding expectations. Wheeler had a well-designed system for her school. These skills served her well in her new role. She became a strong district leader, creating processes that are workable in a variety of school settings.

3 From affiliation to separation.

The school leader is affiliated with the school and the internal and external communities he or she serves. This affiliation comes from daily interactions and relationships with those communities within the school. The district leader, while affiliated with the system, rarely interacts with the same group of students, faculty, or parents and is more likely to interact with community leaders on

As a building leader, Martha Spearman knew which department had what and how much of each. As the district's technology director, she was perplexed when she had 25 extra computers to give out.

systemwide issues. The result for district leaders is a sense of separation from the real work of schools.

As a principal, Victor Nesbitt loved committee work. He thought he did the work well, resulting in positive outcomes for students. When he began his new committee assignment, setting enrollment zones, he missed working with people from his school. Now that he works with community members and parents, his positional authority means little. After several months of work that felt slow, Nesbitt finally recognized that he is the right man for the job. Some tasks require more separation from individual buildings.

4 From "for superintendent" to "with superintendent."

As a school leader, the relationship with the superintendent is described as a line position. While reporting to the superintendent, the district office leader also collaborates with, provides critical analysis for, and serves as a resource to the superintendent.

School leaders are accustomed to a formal or line relationship with the superintendent. Maggie Curtis learned quickly that her superintendent appreciated her subject-matter expertise, but he also expects her, as chief of staff, to consistently, and often without his asking, scrutinize prospective initiatives, point out potential pitfalls, and identify inconsistencies with the mission. These were new skills for her. As a principal, she had expressed her viewpoint, albeit carefully. As a member of the superintendent's staff, her unfiltered candor is essential as he seeks to be fully informed.

5 From receiving service to providing service.

School leaders provide service and leadership for their schools. District office leaders provide service and leadership for all schools. School leaders may not be aware of the concerns or needs of other school leaders. The district office leader is responsible for being acutely aware of all, and sometimes competing, school needs.

Martha Spearman knew how to divvy out resources. As a building leader, she knew which department had what and how much of each. As the district's technology director, she was perplexed when she had 25 extra computers to give out. Her former methodology would result in a small school getting more modern computers, but the largest school would have more students without access to computers that could do what students need.

She ended up using a different data point: the ratio of students to modern computers. Using that data, she asked the three campuses with the highest ratios to write a plan showing

how they would use the 25 computers. After a committee read the proposals, none of the plans rose to the top. Spearman then offered the same process to the next two schools. After reading those two plans, she awarded the 25 computers to the school with the best proposal.

6 From implement to design.

School and program leaders implement district initiatives designed in collaboration with district office leaders. Frequently, the final design must accommodate the needs of all schools and programs, which may vary. As a result, school leaders can customize district programs for their schools within parameters agreed on throughout the district. The district office leader monitors the implementation to ensure congruence with district goals.

As he transitioned to the technology office, Addison McMurtry was most excited about a district-wide launch of an initiative. He worked closely with the focus building, developing a very tight plan with clear outcomes. Victoria Bernhardt's multiple measures of data model formed the basis of the evaluation plan, and as he presented it to the board of education, he became more and more excited about the project.

When it came time to collect some of the school process data, the building principal was surprised to see McMurtry. "Why are you here doing observations?" the principal asked. He viewed it as his job. McMurtry was confused. The written plan — which every member had signed off on — listed him as the observer. As McMurtry reflected on the situation, he realized the onus of the developed plan was on him, not the school. He was still living more on the implementation side of this continuum, not the design.

7 From product (your work) to process (their work).

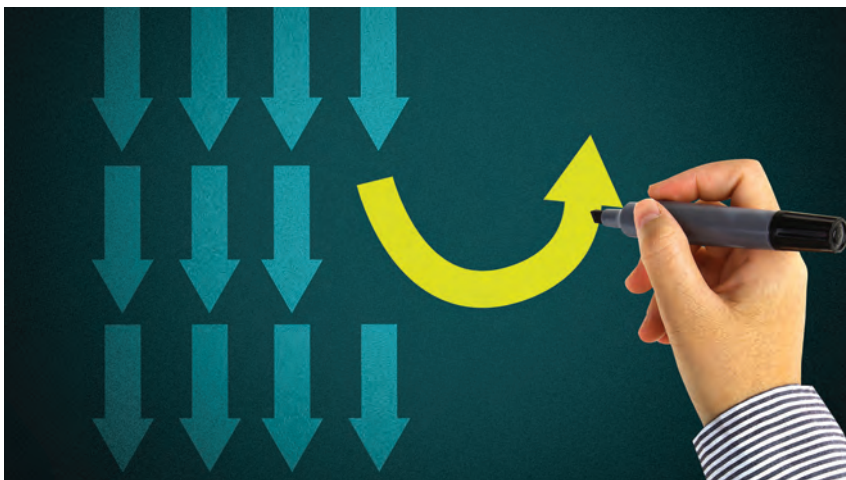
School leaders are responsible for overseeing programs that promote student achievement. Accountability for student work rests with school leaders. District office leaders are responsible for the processes and resources that support those school programs, which are allocated districtwide to achieve district goals.

As a high school principal, Arthur Bolling knew how to set student achievement targets for his evaluation and school improvement plan. As the secondary schools director, he is having more difficulty setting what his superintendent calls "process targets." Bolling is a bottom-line guy and would rather use student test scores to measure his effectiveness, but he understands that he is now another step removed from the classroom. He is looking at his department work plan for the year and will use some of those deliverables (e.g. revised course curriculum calendars) as process goals.

8 From facilitating to networking.

School leaders facilitate the work of their students, faculty, staff, and community. They are responsible for facilitating interactions between and among all constituents and district office leaders. District office leaders network with school and other system leaders, the community at large, and state and federal agencies in order to develop alliances for conducting and completing the district's work.

Frannie Johannsen is an introvert, plain and simple. As a building principal, it was easy to overcome this for pep rallies and honor assembles. Even curriculum nights were manageable. As the federal program director, she is having difficulty with the required grant meetings. The constant networking just to understand the program requirements drains her. She needs these relationships and networks in order for schools to meet their goals. As a school leader, she could often work with just



one contact. As a district leader, she needs to amass a web of contacts and possibilities.

9 From center stage to backstage.

School leaders are identified with the school. Frequently, they are center stage. When a school name is mentioned, the building leader is closely identified with the school, its activities, and its standing in the community. The district office leader operates backstage and supports the work of the school leader.

Nancy Grimes was the principal of the same building for 27 years. When the superintendent asked her to consider central office work, she initially resisted but eventually believed it might be an appropriate transition. After several months, she realized how lonely central office work could be. She missed the schools, the staff, the students, and, sometimes, even the parents. It took almost a year in her new position for her to realize that school successes were also hers. She played a part — just not one where name appeared in the credits.

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CLEARLY A NEED

Five cohorts later, 80 Georgia leaders have demonstrated their growth in the program outcomes. The competitive application process does not reward central office experience. The cohorts are about 50% principals and 50% central office leaders. This mix has been crucial to the program's success.

Since the first cohort in 2009, a nationwide conversation about central office leadership has surfaced (Honig et. al, 2010). The Wallace Foundation made a significant investment in principal preparation (Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2013).

Since that time, additional funds have been included to highlight the importance of principal supervision and district leadership. Georgia's Gwinnett County Public Schools developed both leadership and aspiring principals programs. In 2013, these programs included a cohort of central office leaders, highlighting the district's commitment to building high-quality district leaders.

When these nine shifts are negotiated artfully, program graduates move from being an expert to sharing expertise. With these supports, a career path to district leadership is clear, relevant, and attractive. District leaders with these new skill sets make a difference for schools and the children those buildings serve.

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