

The Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy (CTP) University of Washington

The Pedagogy of Third-Party Support for Instructional Improvement: A Partnership between the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) and Highline School District

Pilot Study Executive Summary October, 2005

**Chrysan Gallucci
Beth Boatright
Dan Lysne
Juli Swinnerton**

Center for the Study of Teaching & Policy
www.ctpweb.org

Executive Summary

A decade and more of state policymaking that set high standards for student performance and enacted high-stakes accountability measures followed by the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has produced growing pressure on school districts across the country. Especially in urban and rural areas where leadership shortages, teacher turnover, and achievement gaps persist, school districts face increasing urgency to link the daily work of educators more clearly and directly with learning outcomes for students. Attempts to address these concerns engage districts in a variety of activities aimed at building a stronger internal system of supports for instructional improvement.

Recent years have seen an explosion of activity by third-party groups supporting school districts in their efforts to address issues of instructional improvement. Some of these relationships are largely externally driven through philanthropic activity focused on the improvement of schools and school systems (for example, the Panasonic Foundation's systemic change efforts, the Gates Foundation small school initiatives, or the Annenberg Challenge grants). In other cases, district

leaders are the primary designers and instigators of change efforts that intentionally draw in external partners for research, capacity building, and professional development support (for example, the University of Pittsburgh's Learning Research and Development Center's (LDRC) work with New York District #2).

Research into district change efforts supported by "intermediaries" have offered some insight into the work of assisting leaders in developing the capacity to lead improvements in teaching and learning (Togneri, 2003; Resnick & Hall, 1998; Corcoran & Christman, 2002; Honig, 2004). Scholars have yet to take a close look, however, at what is going on in districts and third-party arrangements especially when the external support providers are explicit about their intentions to develop district capacity for instructional improvement. There, a form of teaching and learning is taking place. There is a need to know much more than we currently do about the way these third-party arrangements stimulate the district's own "system learning" at the same time that they offer concrete guidance for the everyday practice of teachers and administrators.

In the fall of 2004, we initiated a qualitative research study into what, and how, a third-party support provider-the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) at the University of Washington-engages districts in a collaborative teaching and learning partnership about instructional improvement. This report summarizes the results of a one-year pilot investigation of CEL's work in Highline School District.

A key problem for research on third-party arrangements rests in understanding how the pedagogy of the external provider matters in helping to grow leaders' and practitioners' capacity to reshape and improve teaching and learning. Gaining this understanding means looking closely at the way professionals at all levels of district systems learn by engaging in new practices and learning about new possibilities for their work. At the core of this phenomenon are fundamental, unanswered questions about the nature of the relationship between districts and third-parties, the "pedagogy" of third-party engagement, and the dynamics of "system learning" (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003).

Research Questions

Three central questions about the pedagogy of third-party support providers guided our pilot study of the partnership between CEL and Highline School District.

- 1) What is the nature of the partnership between the third-party support provider and the school district?
- 2) What (and how) does the relationship with a third-party support provider teach about the practice of leadership for instructional improvement?
- 3) What do district actors learn from their partnership with a third-party?

Method

We investigated these questions using a one-year case study design intended to seek answers and raise increasingly focused questions for future research. To develop an understanding of the nature of the partnership, to describe what was taught, and to assess what was learned among district actors we collected and analyzed 35 interviews and multiple informal conversations, field notes from observations of over 45 district and school events, as well as artifacts from district,

school, and classroom sources. Data collection focused on district instructional leaders, district-level events, and instructional visits to several schools. We conducted research activities in a limited sample of two schools—an elementary school and a high school—in order to study partnership events at that level of the system.

Findings

The Nature of the Partnership. CEL utilizes a comprehensive theory of action that includes a number of activity settings and teaching strategies that saturated Highline School District with opportunities to learn about instructional leadership and instructional improvement, including: instructional visits (a form of school walkthroughs), leadership coaching, instructional coaching and demonstration teaching for literacy coaches and classroom teachers, and district and school planning sessions¹. Three of these activities were a non-negotiable part of the CEL partnership with Highline School District.

- **Leadership Seminars**
These monthly, all-day teaching sessions for building principals and coaches were CEL's foundation activity for teaching literacy content and instructional leadership. District leaders took an active role with CEL staff and consultants in the planning and the execution of the sessions. Sessions typically involved participants in observations of content-focused demonstration lessons with Highline students as well as teaching and learning activities related to reading instruction.
- **Instructional Leadership Council**
Although in theory these monthly meetings were intended to help district leaders think more strategically about their policies, practices, and structures; in Highline they focused on "troubleshooting and communicating about upcoming plans" for the partnership activities. Participants at these meetings typically included a representative team of district players: central office instructional leaders and the Superintendent, representatives of the Union, elementary, middle, and high school principals, and the CEL Program Director. The meetings took place monthly during the first two years of the CEL/Highline partnership.
- **Coaching**
CEL's pedagogy rested on a coaching model that includes description of 'best' practices, demonstrations of those practices, attempts by learners to approximate, and the provision of feedback. CEL staff and consultants modeled instructional and leadership practices across a variety of school and classroom settings including at the Leadership Seminars, on instructional visits in schools, and in work with literacy coaches and teachers.

CEL brought expertise to Highline regarding instructional leadership and pedagogical content knowledge, first in literacy and later in mathematics. During the 2004-2005 school year CEL contracted with seven literacy and leadership consultants who had previous experience in District #2 in NYC, San Diego Unified School District, and Chicago Public Schools². To foster change, CEL promoted district-wide immersion in ongoing professional development guided and modeled by the consultants and coordinated by a CEL Program Director. We found the partnership between Highline and CEL unique among third-party arrangements in the following ways:

- The partnership involved a process of ongoing negotiation. CEL brought a specific theory of action about change related to instructional improvement, but much of what CEL accomplished in Highline was a matter of step-by-step negotiation and planning with central office and building leaders. This process was strategic, not scripted.
- The work took place "on-the-ground." The role of the Program Director in Highline was to orchestrate the work of the seven consultants in partnership with district instructional leaders. In practice, the Program Director spent considerable time in phone or email conversations and planning meetings with central office leaders and coaching in schools and classrooms as requested. Her work on-the-ground in Highline extended well beyond the contracted professional development sessions and planning meetings. CEL consultants likewise spent their time (154 total days during the 2004-2005 academic year) in schools and classrooms, usually with district instructional leaders at their side.
- The partnership was context-specific. CEL's relationship with Highline was dynamic. Because the work evolved on the ground, it was tailored to the specific needs of the district. Approaching the work in this fashion, CEL customized its strategy for the Highline context-through extensive conversation with district and building leaders.
- The partnership depended on the strength of relationships that evolved over time. Our informants characterized the interactions between CEL and the district as growing in honesty and trust. The nature of the reform effort required ongoing, often critical, feedback and the interactions were not without tensions. Some informants told us that CEL had multiple voices across consultants-at times this was viewed as a resource and sometimes it was a source of misinterpretation. There was a delicate balance to be achieved between an external partner pushing in to the district with a strong, clear vision of instructional leadership and instructional practice and *pulling out* in order to support the district's growth.

What was CEL teaching? CEL's theory of action was explicit about "powerful instruction" and the components of instructional leadership. CEL engaged district personnel in ongoing study and coaching in a specific content area (e.g., literacy, mathematics). Our findings indicate that CEL was teaching at least the following:

- Instructional Leadership: To quote a CEL staff member, "*The nexus for our work lies in leadership and leadership development and we mean at the district level and the building level. And, how the development of that leadership can help to improve instruction and instructional practice...that's, in a nutshell, 'the work.'*" CEL coached and modeled the development of leadership skills such as (1) developing leadership voice; (2) conducting instructional visits in schools and classrooms; (3) assessing and planning for the professional development of principals and teachers; and (4) aligning policies and procedures with strong instructional leadership practices. Underlying all of these practices, however, was the strong belief that "*you can't lead what you don't know.*" Therefore, CEL assumed the necessity of situating instructional leadership skills in the context of content-specific pedagogy.
- Literacy Content Knowledge: In Highline, CEL introduced the components of a balanced approach to reading instruction including, for example Read Aloud, Shared Reading, and Independent Reading. CEL also taught the *Conditions for Learning* modeled after Cambourne (1989). The specifics regarding the content knowledge were negotiated with

the district. The underlying message, however, was a belief that "*powerful teaching*"-a term used to describe learning environments that enable all students to be taught and, with effort, to master cognitively demanding curriculum (Brandt, 1998)-was the key to achieving improved student outcomes.

- Opening Up Educational Practice: CEL's work in Highline was ultimately about teaching educators to open their practice to public scrutiny. CEL directors and consultants modeled the opening of practice in at least two ways: (1) encouraging the scrutiny of one's own practice (through instructional visits to schools and classroom observations, as well as through the use of leadership voice); and (2) observing images of the possible (through modeling, demonstration lessons, inter-district visits, and trips to districts such as District #2 in NYC and San Diego).

What was Highline learning? We documented learning among district and building leaders and, to varying degrees in the schools we studied, among coaches and teachers. When resources were concentrated (as they were on district leaders, building leaders, coaches, and some teacher), we saw evidence of learning-where there were fewer resources, predictably there was less response to the partnership work. Following are highlights of change that we observed among district actors.

- District leaders were learning to assess and support the professional development of building principals. Principals were becoming familiar with the professional development needs of their classroom teachers. This learning was evident in conversations that took place during instructional visits to schools and classrooms and in the professional development plans at both the district and building level³.
- District and building leaders were developing leadership voice as evidenced in their delivery of opening and closing statements at professional development events and in their instructional letters. Principals wrote "instructional letters" weekly to their staffs.
- The daily work of district instructional leaders and building principals was changing-central office leaders aimed to be in each of their 10-11 buildings two times per month (and were often successful); most principals were in classrooms two hours per day.
- District leaders were making strategic leadership decisions about the instructional improvement and were taking increasing ownership for the work.
- Everyone we talked to reported learning something about reading instruction. To varying degrees, teachers and coaches in the district were learning to implement the reading strategies. In particular, at one high school, where a CEL consultant was contracted for 25 days of coaching with a group of six 9th grade literacy teachers, there was significant change in instructional practice.

Impacts on the District System

Differential support for learners. CEL's theory of action rested on a differentiated approach that allocated resources to the five district leaders and to principals, who supervised the instructional improvement work. Another "tier" of support was aimed at building coaches and to a relatively few "goer" teachers and schools (some of whom contracted individually for

additional CEL resources). The theory of action promoted by CEL and adopted by Highline took advantage of the will of these "goers" to build their capacity.

CEL's approach was strategic-infuse knowledge among key leaders, build deep capacity among the willing and able, and provide as much on-the-ground coaching in 'goer' sites as possible. In many ways, this represented a cultural shift in business-as-usual for the school district-and would for many school districts. The strategy did not, for example, promote *equal* resources to every school or, within schools, to every classroom. The theory held that building strategic models of good practice within the district would serve as powerful teaching sites for future learners.

New policies and procedures. In large part, Highline adopted CEL's approach and developed several new policies and procedures to support their instructional improvement goals. The district made the following changes that informants connected to the partnership work with CEL:

1. Structural redesign of central office roles so that leaders of curriculum and instruction had responsibility for principal evaluation as well as for their professional growth.
2. Development of a new principal evaluation tool that was aligned with instructional improvement goals.
3. New allocation of responsibilities among three instructional leaders so that each was responsible for a manageable number of schools (approximately 10-11).
4. Literacy coaches were assigned in each building. The job description was rewritten after one year to align with district goals.
5. The development of a studio/residency model for classroom level professional development (to be implemented during the 05-06 academic year).

Tensions and challenges. Our informants identified several tensions that existed in moving the work forward. Nearly everyone we spoke to talked about these issues and most informants saw them as part and parcel of doing business in a diverse urban school district. Following is a brief synopsis of the key areas of tension.

- Urgency for results versus the time it takes to build capacity.
For Highline, the investment in capacity building as a strategy for change carried with it a concern regarding the time it took for principals and teachers to learn instructional improvement strategies and achieve results with students. This sense of urgency was articulated in the district's goal of "9 out of 10" students graduated and college-ready by 2010. Highline School District was a "district in improvement" in mathematics during the 2004-2005 school year⁴. Six of their 32 schools were in some level of school improvement. One of the district's academic leaders described this as "a tension point", adding that "it's probably due to the accountability, that without showing results in terms of what the state and the public look for very soon, we're not going to be able to keep up the effort-without tying those together more." Recognizing that the "deep" work takes time, this leader noted that everyone needs to recognize "the need to show results for kids at the same time we build capacity that we know will make a difference in the long term."

The struggle to build long-term capacity came into direct competition with the very present pressure of the state and federal accountability systems.

- Competing Elementary Literacy Programs.

When CEL began working with Highline during the 2003-2004 school year, there were several existing literacy programs in place. First, eight of the 22 elementary schools in Highline were Reading First schools-and the district chose not to turn down those federal and state resources. In addition, the district had adopted Open Court as its primary reading program prior to the start of the partnership with CEL and many of its elementary schools had implemented the Accelerated Reader program. A district leader described the district's approach as comprehensive which meant implementing the multiple programs "side by side" with CEL's balanced literacy curriculum. In practice, this meant looking for connections among the instructional approaches.

- Small Schools Initiative and Instructional Improvement Goals.

During the time of this study, Highline School District was engaged in two major initiatives-leadership for content-focused instructional improvement and high school redesign. During the year, for example, Clover Valley High School worked actively with the Coalition of Essential Schools. [The school was the recipient of a grant to support their conversion process from CES.] In 2005, Highline was awarded \$5.6 million district grant from the Gates Foundation and variations of small school redesign plans were well underway across the district's high schools. All of the district leaders and the principal at Clover Valley talked about the necessity of maintaining a focus on instructional improvement, even given the initiative to restructure high schools. Our data suggested that there were signs of stress and tension involved in accomplishing these simultaneous improvement and redesign goals, however the high school redesign process was just unfolding near the end of this study. It was not yet clear how Highline would achieve alignment in its work across its partnerships with multiple external organizations.

Notes:

¹For more information about CEL's theory of action and district partnership work see their web site:

<http://www.k-12leadership.org>

²CEL employs over 20 consultants with expertise in either subject matter content or in leadership practice. CEL assigns consultants based on the evolving needs of their district partners.

³Note that we observed practice in 4 of 32 building programs in Highline District.

⁴Districts "in-improvement" in Washington State refers to districts or schools that are not meeting AYP goals and are identified by the Office of the Superintendent of Instruction.