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Building System Capacity for Improving High School Graduation Rates in California

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ABSTRACT

Addressing difficult education issues like school dropouts requires concerted support for schools and the building of educational capacity. Educational capacity, defined here as *the ability to deliver, or support the delivery of, assistance to students to improve learning outcomes,* is an essential but under-developed ingredient to support schools to meet accountability goals and achieve standards. Districts, the State, universities, and private and non-profit providers all play important roles in contributing capacity to the educational system, yet their efforts largely lack coordination. This report analyzes the different, nested, and interdependent roles of these education support providers. The report particularly examines the role of school districts. The author argues that, while well functioning school districts are uniquely positioned and integral to building school capacity, they also generally need substantial capacity-building themselves to identify and coordinate the array of resources that must be brought to bear in order to address pressing educational challenges. The report concludes by suggesting that the most potentially powerful and systemic approach to coordinating the different organizations supporting educational improvement would establish a state-wide *consortium of support providers*.

American public education is at a crossroads. One road leads to a vibrant system of public education that better prepares future citizens with the skills and understanding to build a stronger nation. Down another road is a threadbare public education system that serves some children well and others barely at all. The crux of the question is whether we will be able to provide the education that all of America's children need for the nation to prosper in the increasingly technological, politically complex, and economically competitive global environment.

There are two critical dimensions to this question—the sociopolitical and the educational. First, do we have the social commitment and political will to make the commitment to the often mundane task of educating all children adequately? This is a question that our political leaders can address through their priorities and policies. Second, can we reorganize the education system to provide strong support to teachers and schools to deliver high-quality learning experiences for all students? The purpose of this paper is to address the second of these two questions.

Our education system has historically provided an excellent education for some students and barely the basics for others; never before have we faced the challenge of raising learning outcomes of all students across the land, regardless of socioeconomic status or ethnicity (Fuhrman & Elmore, 2004; Cohen, 1996; McLaughlin & Shepard, 1995). Thus the challenge of broad-scale improvement of the American education system can be seen as the challenge of increasing the knowledge and skill of teachers and school leaders to provide powerful learning opportunities for all students in all schools in all subgroups. This is a monumental challenge. It requires high levels of capacity on the part of teachers and school leaders. It requires that these educators have access to and can provide effective supports for students to keep them in school, motivated, and engaged in learning. It requires a shared understanding of what good teaching looks like so that teachers are equipped with, and can confidently apply, effective practices. It requires that teachers have the time, structures, and incentives to learn from one another. And, it goes far beyond the current subject-certification requirements that are part of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Who is to build the capacity of teachers and school leaders to provide these things? Where will the knowledge and skill come from to help school personnel effectively serve their students? There are several visions of how this might occur. One vision embraces the marketplace as the solution to this problem. Proponents of this perspective argue that a free market of educational goods and services offered to individual schools provides the best opportunity to increase local capacity to improve performance (Friedman, 1997; Chubb & Moe, 1990). They argue that a market orientation would unleash heretofore bureaucratically constrained creativity and tap economic efficiencies to produce viable solutions to the capacity problem.

Another perspective calls for greater centralization of education, even a national education system. Historically, national education systems were developed as an expression of national identity and social development (Green, 1997; Archer, 1979).

Advocates of this vision argue that national education systems can produce clearer, more efficient, and more equitable educational experiences for students (Finn, Julian, & Petrilli, 2006). Rather than the competing visions and piecemeal approaches of decentralized systems, national education systems feature common standards, curricula, and assessments. Researchers who have studied national performance note that nations with national education systems—with national curricula and assessment systems—outperform decentralized systems like that of the United States. (Schmidt, McKnight, & Raizen, 1997).

Others view the state as the essential architect of local capacity. Indeed, if one follows the money in American education, state legislatures typically provide the majority of educational funding. The state of California, for example, in 2001-2002 provided 60% of the $47 billion that was spent annually on education; about 30% came from local districts and the remaining 10% came from the federal government (National Center on Education Statistics, 2004). In the current system, states dominate the educational landscape by developing standards that exemplify the learning outcomes that students should master, tests that assess student understanding, and accountability frameworks that provide incentives and sanctions to schools for their performance (Elmore, Abelmann, & Fuhrman, 1996).

Naturally, school districts are commonly thought of as the primary developers of local capacity (Spillane, 1996; Massell, 2000; Supovitz, 2006). Working with school boards, district leaders set priorities and the vision for local education. They select or develop the curricula and pacing guides that are used in their schools. They are integrally involved, along with school faculties, in selecting the array of programs and supports that schools use to support students in different subject areas. They develop, coordinate, and deliver most of the training and professional development for teachers, school principals, and other support personnel (Firestone & Hirsch, 2006).

Despite these different perspectives, the fact is that none of these players alone can move the education system to where it needs to be. The isolated focus of each fails to provide a full perspective of the whole, just as the blind men of lore mischaracterized the elephant. The federal government, states, school districts, private providers, and universities all play important roles in children's educational experiences. The problem is not that schools lack ideas, support, or accountability. The problem is that each of the important players supporting educational improvement operates somewhat independently of the others. There is very little, if any, coordination in American education.

In this paper I argue three major points. First, a key problem in American education is the lack of coordination between the various public and private organizations that support school improvement. Second, the crux of this problem is one of nested capacity—that is, the interdependencies among the different school-support organizations in the current American educational configuration. These organizations not only must build their own capacity to support school improvement, but also support others in their efforts to build capacity. Third, the district plays a key role in supporting educational improvement. Focusing on that role, I examine how nested support might tackle the student dropout

problem. The report concludes with a framework for coordinated education reform and a set of issues that must be addressed to move this idea forward.

The Idea of Coordination in Education Reform

Educators live in a decentralized world and the problem of broad-scale educational improvement is in part a consequence of that fragmentation. Teachers, school leaders, district administrators, state policymakers, external providers, and university educators all contribute considerable thought, effort, and resources to improving the quality of public education. Currently, however, there is very little coordination between and among these central supporters of educational improvement. While they all are trying their best to sponsor improvement, their efforts are largely uncoordinated and unintegrated.

Yet meeting the unprecedented and daunting challenge of improving the educational experiences for all students will require unprecedented coordination among all these institutions. Improvement will not come solely from the state, the districts, the private sector, or the schools. Rather, improvement will require a synchronization of efforts from state, local, and independent authorities. Currently, we have an informal division of labor among the many organizations that are working to improve public education. Passive knowledge of others' efforts is not enough to support teachers' and schools' efforts to educate today's youth.

The idea of coordinated educational reform is not new. Its genesis can be found in the concept of systemic educational reform. Systemic, or systemwide, educational reform embodies the idea that each level of government has distinct responsibilities for improvement (Smith & O'Day, 1991). The compelling theory underlying systemic reform is that powerful improvements in teaching and learning can come from developing coherence and alignment across the complex and different elements and components of an educational system. Systemic reform is believed to be more promising than programmatic reforms because the latter, no matter how individually powerful, are bound to bump up against other pieces of the system, limiting their reach and effectiveness.

The concept of systemic education reform grew out of a general dissatisfaction with the seemingly meager effects of past reform efforts. Smith and O'Day (1991), in their seminal formulation of systemic school reform, described systemic reform as the convergence of two previous waves of education reform. The *first wave* of education reform, spanning the 1970s and early 1980s, focused on expanding and improving educational inputs (e.g., increased length of school day and expanded graduation requirements) and ensuring basic skill competency. The *second wave*, beginning in the mid-1980s and stretching through the end of the decade, focused on decentralization, teacher professionalism, and bottom-up changes (such as site-based management). Neither of these waves generated widespread changes in teaching practices; thus, they did not produce improvements in student learning.

Smith and O'Day's (1991) response to past reform impotence was systemic reform.

Systemic reform, in its increasingly refined form, emphasizes three major efforts: (1) challenging standards for students, (2) the alignment of the policy components of educational governance (curriculum, assessments, accountability systems, teacher certification requirements, preservice and in-service professional development), and (3) local school flexibility to develop strategies that best suit the needs of their students (Cohen, 1995; Fuhrman, 1993). According to Smith and O'Day, systemic reform "would marry the vision and guidance provided by coherent, integrated, centralized education policies common in many nations with the high degree of local responsibility and control demanded by U.S. tradition" (p. 252). However, systemic reform was conceived by Smith and O'Day as a framework for state-level guidance for education, not one that encompassed the entire educational system. As the concept of systemic reform played out through the end of the 1990s and into the new century, the terms *standards-based reform* and *standards-based accountability* became synonymous with *systemic reform* (Chatterji, 2002).

Systemic reform and its descendent, standards-based reform, have undoubtedly changed the landscape of American education. The standards and accountability efforts have become powerful cornerstones of improvement in America. In the best of cases, state and local standards provide clear expectations of what teachers are expected to teach and students are expected to learn. They specify the central concepts about each subject that are the essential knowledge and building blocks for that topical area. If the standards delineate *performance* standards, not just *content* standards, they include invaluable examples of student work that demonstrate mastery of the standards and commentary explaining exactly why that work meets the level of expectation. In addition, high-stakes accountability systems have become a fixture on the educational landscape. They provide a picture of how schools and students are progressing towards standards and, through both implicit and explicit stakes, they provide incentives for both students and educators to meet expectations. These accountability systems have driven schools to attend to instructional matters as never before and unearthed socioeconomic and racial inequalities in the education system that were papered over by overall averages of performance.

Despite these notable successes, an important lesson learned from the systemic reform movement is that standards, assessments, and accountability are not enough to bring about wide-scale improvements in American education. This has been precisely the finding of several studies of school reform in the last decade or so since systemic reform swept across the educational landscape.

David and Shields (2001) evaluated the efforts of seven urban school districts that had received funding from the Pew Trusts to support their implementation of systemic reform. The evaluators followed the districts' efforts closely over five years, documenting the decisions they made, strategies they employed, their implementation efforts, and district-wide changes in instruction. The authors found that standards, assessments, and accountability do not communicate high expectations for students, provide information to guide instructional improvement, or motivate widespread instructional change beyond test preparation. They concluded that "districts can have

standards, assessments, and accountability in place, yet not improve the quality of curriculum and instruction in classrooms" (p. iii).

Systemic reform was tried on a much larger scale by the National Science Foundation (NSF) in its Statewide Systemic Initiatives (SSI) program. The SSI program was NSF's ambitious effort to undertake comprehensive, coordinated reforms in mathematics, science, and technology education. Beginning in 1991, NSF made awards, typically for $10 million over five years, in 26 states. Grantees in each state (typically consortiums of university faculties, state departments of education, and local education advocacy groups) were charged with developing a vision for their reform efforts, bringing together stakeholders, leveraging new and existing resources, and enacting widespread changes in the ways the subject matter was delivered. SRI International led a multiyear evaluation of the state initiatives (Zucker, Shields, Adelman, & Powell, 1995; Zucker, 1998). According to the SRI evaluations, the SSIs succeeded in (a) introducing more progressive conceptions of mathematics and science instruction into schools, (b) deepening the understanding of educators in SSI states about the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) mathematics standards and the National Research Council (NRC) science standards, (c) sponsoring or otherwise fostering high-quality mathematics and science professional development, and (d) advocating for changes or development of state mathematics and science assessments. In one of their cross-cutting evaluation reports, Zucker and colleagues pointed in particular to SSI difficulties in bringing together stakeholders around a coherent vision of mathematics and science reform and building broad-scale mechanisms to develop teacher capacity to deliver ambitious instruction. The evaluators expressed concern about "the extent to which the SSI strategies include reasonable plans for scaling up their reform efforts" (p. S-3). Coordinating the educational constituencies in the states proved to be one of the most overwhelming challenges for the SSIs.

These are just a few of many examinations of the theory of systemic reform and different systemic reform efforts (see, for example, Vinovskis, 1996; Fuhrman, 1994; Floden, Goertz, & O'Day, 1995; Supovitz & Snyder-Taylor, 2005; Clune, 1998). Taken together, the examinations of systemic reform point to two critical and connected challenges. The first challenge is the lack of capacity at many levels of the system to provide sufficient support to achieve standards, as measured by accountability systems. And it is capacity that is the crucial third leg of the stool of educational improvement, supporting both standards and assessment-based accountability. The second challenge lies in the difficulty of bringing together and then coordinating the efforts of all of the important stakeholders in educational reform. Thus, both the building of capacity at all levels of the education system as well as coordination of the various supports conjoin in the challenge of nested capacity.

The Problem of Nested Capacity

For this paper I define educational capacity as *the ability to deliver, or support the delivery of, assistance to students to improve learning outcomes*. This is a deceptively simple definition because it encompasses a large number of issues. In the classroom,

teachers must have the capacity to effectively convey knowledge and ideas to students, understanding and responding to the complex array of factors that influence this process—teacher and student prior knowledge, student readiness to learn, student motivation, teacher content knowledge, pedagogical skills, classroom management, etc. At the school level, school leaders must have the capacity to access and deploy their resources to work with teachers, parents, and the community to support teachers and students. At the district level, leaders must have the capacity to support school faculties in their responsibilities, develop or select curriculum materials, provide or coordinate professional development for school faculties and school leaders, and provide the array of support systems that fulfill the needs of schools, teachers, and students. At the state level, leaders must have the capacity to develop and manage systems of standards and accountability and support districts and schools in their improvement efforts. Thus, every level of the system is trying to build its own capacity even as it is trying to support the development of capacity at other layers of the system.

The problem of building capacity is what Harvard professor Ronald Heifetz (1994) calls an *adaptive challenge*. As opposed to technical challenges, which have clear (although sometimes complex) solutions, adaptive challenges are those for which there is no clearly known solution. The capacity problem represents an adaptive challenge because a highly functioning education system must have sufficient capacity at multiple levels, all interworking with each other. Such a system has never before been demanded or accomplished.

The nested nature of the capacity problem has several distinct aspects and implications. These include the challenges of building any type of human capacity, the different types of capacity required at different organizational levels, the interrelated nature of capacity building in education, and the difficulties of taking capacity-building efforts to scale. First is the formidable task of building human capacity in any level of an organization. The complexity of the teaching and learning process itself attests to the difficult nature of consistently producing learning across a set of individuals.

Second, the capacity-building process is made more complicated by the fact that there are different types of capacity required at each of the classroom, school, district, state, federal, university, and provider levels. Each of these entities faces its own unique capacity challenges. Within each of these levels, to some extent leaders' goals drive the types of capacity that they choose to prioritize and build. Consequently, efforts to build capacity at each of these levels are dependent on the priorities of that particular level.

A third consideration in the issue of capacity is the interrelationship among different parts of the education system as they mount efforts to build capacity. To cite a very real example, states may try to build district capacity to deliver accountability data, which may detract from districts' abilities to build their own data-use capacity to support school improvement.[1] This could result in what Hatch (2001) calls "system overload"—a situation where schools and districts are trying to respond to so many demands and

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[1] Just such a process is happening in California, where the state is providing grants to districts to build their capacity to deliver state-required data.

opportunities that their efforts are diffused and ineffectual. In effect, the different levels of the system may end up competing for a school's scarce attention and resources, actually detracting from efforts to fulfill the educative mission.

A fourth consideration in discussing nested capacity is our uncertainty about how to build capacity at a large scale within an education system. Efforts to bring reforms to scale have shown the pitfalls of building capacity at meaningful scale. The difficulty of this task was well illustrated in a 1996 article on scaling up reform by Harvard's Richard Elmore. Elmore explored why several instructional reforms that were very powerful in a few sites failed to successfully transfer to large numbers of schools. While many of the key ingredients of reform were present in the examples he examined, including good educational theories, robust curricular models, and potentially effective professional development strategies, these components were insufficiently strong to take root in other venues. Elmore reached two significant conclusions: First, the essential ideas underlying the reforms tended to be replaced by more formulaic and structural proxies as the reforms were expanded to more sites; second, the ownership created in developing a reform at one site was lost as the reforms were transferred to other sites.

The problem of building nested capacity can be investigated from many different angles and vantage points. In the next section of this paper I examine the problem of nested capacity through the lens of the school district. I have chosen the district as the focal point for this examination because, as I will argue, the district is an essential unit for building capacity across systems of schools. Consistent with the theme of this paper, other educational support organizations, including the states, universities, and external providers, also have very important roles to play in building local capacity. Continuing from a district perspective and incorporating the roles of other educational support providers, I will examine the problem of reducing school dropouts.

Before proceeding, it is important to define the school districts to which I refer. My focus will be on districts with more than a handful of schools. There are over 16,000 districts in the country, and most states have a large number of school districts; however, most districts are made up of only a few schools. In California, for example, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2006) lists 1,128 school districts serving 6.3 million students. More than half of these are extremely small districts. About half—601 of California's districts—have fewer than five schools. At the other end of the spectrum, the largest 200 school districts in California serve about 74% of the students in the state. In this paper I am not focusing on the small districts with only a few schools; their challenge is essentially that of the individual school. What I focus on in this report are those districts with more than 10 schools to coordinate. While they may represent only about a third of the districts in California, they educate almost 80% of the children in the state. These districts have central offices that are attempting to support a range of schools under their purview.

The District Role in Building Educational Capacity

Well-functioning districts are uniquely positioned and integral to building school capacity to deliver a quality education to students. This is because districts straddle the space between individual schools—where reforms are ultimately enacted—and the external world, wherein lie the ideas, materials, and expertise to make reform happen. Residing in this middle ground, but closer to the schools and the community, districts are best situated to play a central role in building school capacity. However, school districts lack the capacity to identify and coordinate the broad array of resources that must be brought to bear to meet the ambitious challenges of broad-scale educational improvement.

School districts are absolutely integral to efforts to improve the performance of American education for two reasons, one political, the other strategic. The roots of local political involvement in education run deep in American political and civic traditions and are one manifestation of how communities imbue their values and priorities into society. There are long-established precedents of local control of education, and school boards have a long history as both the local expression of community preferences and a bedrock component of America's system of democratic institutions. Because values are inevitably instilled in children through their education, local communities have both the right and the duty to contribute to the shaping of their children's educational experience. Removing the district from this equation would dilute the community's voice and weaken the public influence on the education of children.

Second, districts play a strategic role in reform initiatives, due to the way that institutional change occurs in schools. Meaningful large-scale instructional reforms—reforms that seek to reach deeply into classrooms and change the way that teachers engage students with ambitious content—require fundamental shifts in the ways that teachers think about their work with students. Numerous studies show that deep and lasting change does not occur when reforms are done *to* people, but rather when people either recognize the need for change on their own or are led to this conclusion (Evans, 2001; Fullan, 1991). Endeavors to persuade require both an intimate knowledge of the local context and players, as well as repeated and sustained interactions with them. District leaders are best situated to cultivate the need and rationale for change and to address people's natural aversion to the disruption and psychological dislocation caused by change, as well as to shepherd school faculties through the psychological transformation that accompanies retraining (Evans, 2001). Of course, structural changes can be introduced into schools through external mechanisms; but decades of externally driven efforts—such as school-based management, team-based teaching, and small schools—have produced few results (Elmore, 1996). Meaningful change, the research shows, has to occur locally.

Despite their advantages, mentioned above, districts generally lack the capacity to structure and orchestrate the resources available for school improvement. Historically, districts have not been considered very effective at supporting educational improvement. Weak central office attention to teaching and learning is a well-documented pattern identified by educational researchers. Rowan (1982), for example, surveyed local district staffing patterns in California between 1930 and 1970 and showed that as district central office staff increased and job titles grew more specialized, that specialization did not

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result in more personnel attending to issues of curriculum and instruction. A 1978 study by Hannaway and Sproull found that less than 10% of district work over a given time period had anything to do with schools, and less than 3% had to do with curriculum. Crowson and Morris (1985) analyzed how districts conducted their business and found that 80% of districtwide interactions focused on budget, personnel, scheduling, pupil behavior, facilities, and parent complaints, while less than 20% had to do with curriculum and instruction. Floden (1988) studied district influences on fourth grade mathematics in over 100 districts and five states and concluded that "the picture that emerges is one of districts with a vague intention to direct instructional content, but without any considered strategy to do so" (p. 98). More recent research has identified the difficulties that districts have in analyzing and identifying the source of performance problems, searching the external environment for appropriate responses, assessing the quality of the evidence underlying proposed solutions, and monitoring the efficacy of interventions put into place (Corcoran, Fuhrman,& Belcher, 2001; Gross, Kirst, Holland, & Luschei, 2005).

How Districts Can Support School Improvement

Despite their uneven history in supporting educational improvement, a growing body of recent studies point to the key role that districts can play supporting school improvement. This body of literature takes a variety of angles in its examination of the district role in school improvement and its authors utilize a range of both qualitative and quantitative methods to discern districts' influences. Looking across this research, several broad themes pertinent to our purposes can be identified. First, successful reforms arise from locales with strong leadership driven by a coherent vision. Second, these leaders build their districts' capacity in support of their vision. Third, successful districts coordinate their efforts with other levels of the educational support system. Finally, solid relationships with external providers are visible in many sites that are making noticeable progress. What follows are a few examples from the literature in support of these themes.

The majority of the research on district reform is composed of single-district case studies. Perhaps one of the most influential case studies in the literature is the work of Community District #2 in New York City, reported by Elmore and Burney (1997). In their study, Elmore and Burney highlighted district leaders' vision and commitment to literacy, their emphasis on extensive and latticed professional development and accountability through expectations, as well as a close partnership with New Zealand literacy experts. Snyder (2002) documented the efforts of the New Haven, California, Unified School District to build its capacity to improve the quality of teaching. This study documented the district's role in improving the quality of teaching through such efforts as standards for teachers, recruitment and retention of the teaching force, extensive teacher professional development, and rewards for teachers' knowledge and skill.

As another example of a rich case study, Supovitz (2006) conducted an in-depth longitudinal study of district improvement efforts and their impacts in Duval County, Florida, from 1998 to 2004. Supovitz distilled his analysis into several essential lessons for school leaders. First, effective districts develop a clear vision of what quality instruction looks like in the major content areas. Second, effective districts balance

willing and unwilling methods of influence to build commitment for their instructional vision. Third, effective districts build capacity through employee development at all levels of the organization. Fourth, effective districts marshal external resources. Fifth, effective districts use data formatively to inform both individual decisions about students and programmatic decisions. Finally, effective districts develop strategies to sustain reform efforts over longer periods of time.

A few studies in the recent literature on district-based reform are cross-district analyses. A highly publicized report from MDRC, for example, presented an analysis of four urban systems that were improving student achievement (Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002). The researchers selected the districts based upon trends of improvement in reading and mathematics from 1995 to 2001. The authors found that the improving districts shared several things in common, including:
- a focus on student achievement and specific achievement goals,
- curricula that were aligned with state standards,
- district-wide curricula and instructional approaches,
- well-specified systems for holding district leaders and building staff responsible for producing results,
- a focus on the lowest performing schools,
- clearly defined central office roles, and
- a commitment to data-driven decision-making and instruction.

Their report also highlighted the need for a prolonged period of political and organizational stability and consensus on educational reform strategies.

In another cross-site analysis, Togneri and Anderson (2003) examined the traits of five high-poverty districts that were improving the achievement of their students. The authors found that the districts had "a strikingly similar set of strategies to improve instruction" (p. 4). These included:
- the courage to acknowledge poor performance and the will to seek solutions,
- a vision that focused on student learning and guided instructional improvement, a systemwide approach to improving instruction, including curricula and instructional supports,
- data-based decision-making,
- new approaches to professional development,
- redefined leadership roles, and
- commitment to sustaining reform over the long haul.

A major theme in the district research literature is how districts operate within and are influenced by the strictures of federal and state policies and requirements. Earlier conceptions basically viewed districts as straight implementers of state policy (Firestone, 1989; Marsh & McCabe, 1998). More recently, the ways that districts interpret and mediate state policy have been explored. Firestone and Fairman (1998) categorized district response to state policy as either *fragmented* (poor and variable response), *communicating* (receptive, but weak efforts to respond), or *coordinated* (strong efforts to respond, which may include surpassing state expectations). Spillane (1994, 1998) offered a cognitive perspective on how district leaders interpret and implement state policies

whereby response is influenced by individuals' existing cognitive structures, including their prior knowledge, beliefs, and values.

Increasingly, the research on district reform also is pointing to robust partnerships between districts and external providers as promising strategies for school improvement. RAND researchers studied the partnerships between the Institute for Learning (IFL), a nonprofit group at the University of Pittsburgh, and three urban districts from 2002 to 2004 (Marsh et al., 2005). In the study districts, the IFL worked to build the districts' capacity to develop instructional leadership, school-based coaching, curriculum specification, and data use. The researchers found that the IFL affected district culture, norms, and beliefs about instruction and helped develop the knowledge and skills of central office administrators. They discussed the several lessons stemming from their observation of the district-provider relationship. These included the importance of strong relationships at all levels of the organization to enable partnership efforts, the wariness of local faculties of the reputation of external venders, the salience of provider credibility and tools to build support in schools and at the district level, the influence of the preexisting reform context on a new partnership relationship, the constraints of the capacity of the provider and its services in relation to larger district needs, and the extent to which the providers offerings align themselves to broader district needs.

Supovitz's (2006) study of district reform in Duval County, Florida, featured a close partnership between the district and the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) and its America's Choice comprehensive school reform model. Duval County initially implemented America's Choice in roughly one-third of the district's 150 schools. Thereafter, the county worked with NCEE and incorporated many of the America's Choice tenets within the county's standards-based reform model. Supovitz explored many aspects of the evolving Duval County/NCEE partnership including the alignment of the external provider's offerings with the district's instructional philosophy, the division of labor between the provider and district in providing professional development and assuring its quality, the way the district built its own capacity through the contracting of services with NCEE, and the district's efforts to manage the relationship with the external provider.

A third example of a district/external provider partnership is the long relationship between the First Things First (FTF) reform model and the school district of Kansas City, Kansas, evaluated by researchers at the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) (Gambone, Klem, Moore, & Summers, 2002; Quint, Bloom, Black, Stephens, & Akey, 2005). The FTF reform features small learning communities (SLCs) in which students stay together with the same group of faculty over multiple years; a family advocacy system in which staff members meet with students and monitor their academic, social, and emotional progress; and standards-based faculty instructional improvement efforts. FTF's approach emphasized a close partnership with the district and agreement on the strategies and sequences that the reforms will take and the responsibilities of each party. The MDRC researchers examined many aspects of the reform efforts. In terms of the Kansas City-FTF partnership, the authors stressed three important points. First was the close and flexible partnership between the district and provider. Second was the

district's efforts to both apply pressure on and provide support to local schools on behalf of the reform. Third, the authors emphasized the intensive and responsive technical assistance from FTF, which was willing to make adjustments when needed.

This is by no means a comprehensive review of the vast literature on district support for school improvement (for more robust analyses, see Supovitz, 2006; Elmore, 2004; Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, & McLaughlin, 2002), but it does point to several important features relevant to district capacity for broad-scale school improvement. First, strong district support requires a clear vision of school improvement from which to organize the development of supportive efforts and structures. Second, districts cannot build within themselves all of the capacity needed for school improvement, but rather must partner with a range of external providers (universities, for-profit and nonprofit service providers, etc.) to garner the expertise to bring to bear on the challenge of school improvement. Third, districts need to coordinate their efforts within state and federal policies to capitalize on these initiatives rather than having them dissipate energy and resources from district efforts. Meeting today's educational challenges requires the integrated efforts of the broader educational system.

Building District Capacity to Reduce School Dropouts

Based upon the evolution of education reform in this country and emerging themes on effective district-based reform, I hypothesize that coordinated reform represents a more effective way to build the capacity to address the range of challenges that educators face. In this section I explore how a school district might ameliorate its dropout rates by integrating its efforts with other governmental and nongovernmental education-support organizations.

Although the methods used to measure the dropout rate are the subject of contentious debate, experts estimate that approximately 5% of all young people entering high school do not graduate (NCES, 2001). This problem is far worse in low income and urban areas. According to the National Center on Education Statistics, students with family incomes in the lowest 20% were six times as likely to drop out of high school as their peers from families in the top 20% of the income distribution (NCES, 2001). Many have argued that the current high-stakes accountability environment has exacerbated the dropout problem, as students face exit exams and other barriers to completing high school (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2004). Other CDRP papers focus in greater depth on the contours and causes of the dropout problem.

According to the theory of coordinated education reform, efforts to address the dropout problem would emanate from a district's assessment of the particular causes and circumstances of dropouts in its locality, but require the coordination of a range of support organizations to most effectively build the capacity to reduce the dropout rate. Both the motivation to address this problem and an assessment of its particular scope and dimensions must come from school and district leadership, although other organizations may provide integral assistance in identifying both the causes and solutions.

A typical response might begin with a local needs assessment. For example, the district might collect data on exactly which students were dropping out, what their circumstances were, what existing programs were in place to reduce dropouts, and the extent of their influence. Next, district leaders would ideally develop a coherent vision of what a response to the problem might look like. This would likely involve searching the external environment for approaches being taken by others, canvassing local resources (community support groups, youth groups, etc.) to assess existing and untapped resources, and exploring the evidence around existing externally available dropout prevention strategies. This might, for example, lead to an investigation of the nine programs currently listed by the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse (http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/) as having some success in reducing dropout rates. Because some central-office staffs may lack the capacity to conduct a thorough assessment of the problem and search for the set of possible strategies to address the problem, this might be a place where another support organization, perhaps university faculty, state administrators, or local intermediate unit specialists, could provide the capacity to do so. This would be one component of coordinated capacity building.

An analysis of both the problem and the existing approaches and strategies could point district leaders in several directions, and might lead district leaders to modify the ways they engage at-risk youths in the classroom. Components of an academic solution might include strategies for teachers to increase student engagement with subject-matter content, heterogeneous grouping approaches, accelerated learning programs, introduction of small houses or teams in big high schools, mentoring of at-risk students, and other in-school supports. They might consider adopting a strategy of close monitoring of student performance like that used by the Check & Connect program, or they might adopt a program such Ramp-Up to Literacy or Ramp-Up to Mathematics, both offered by the National Center on Education and the Economy.

Leaders' analyses could lead them to focus on the social dimensions of the problem. More social-oriented strategies might include connections with community groups to address social issues in students' lives, working with health and counseling services to provide behavioral and emotional support systems for students, a personal counseling approach such as that used by the ALAS (Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success) program, or the development of social networks to provide support and bolster connections and communication amongst peers in similar situations. Larger districts might consider adopting more large-scale high school reorganization approaches like those of the Talent Development High School or the Career Academies model. Or perhaps the district would reorganize its high schools in partnership with a program like First Things First, which features many of the supports, including small learning communities and a family advocacy program, that are important components of building a support network for at-risk students.

Based on what approach or combination of approaches the district decided to adopt, it could very well decide to develop a relationship with a single or set of external providers to work with the district to build its capacity to support students at risk of dropping out. This partnership would be another component of the coordination required to build

capacity to support educational improvement. The district should not consider this an outsourcing of this function but rather a strategy to build its own capacity to incorporate these strategies into its own systems for better delivering assistance to students to improve their learning outcomes. This would be another component of coordinated capacity building.

<div align="center">*****************</div>

By using the lens of coordinated education reform to examine how a district might build its capacity to respond more effectively to its dropout problem, we can acknowledge the necessity of coordination among the different types of educational support organizations to assist schools in their efforts. While the problems to be addressed are rooted in schools, school faculties lack the time and expertise to address the dropout issue on their own. The district central office is best suited to initiate a response because the contours of school-based issues are local and best understood by leaders who recognize the distinctive context of the problem. However, districts generally lack the capacity to respond to the array of challenges they face without substantial assistance. Therefore, other education-support organizations must buttress district capacity with their own support capability. This is the essence of strong nested capacity. For state education departments, this might mean providing technical assistance in problem identification, searching for and analyzing prospective programs and strategies, and analyzing their effectiveness thereafter. For universities this may entail technical assistance in the search and analysis process just described for states, or perhaps evaluation assistance. For external providers, it would mean supporting districts as they implement their preferred response. The overarching point is that some de facto coordination already occurs in present efforts to address educational problems such as dropouts, but current efforts to integrate the unique capacities of the different education support providers is woefully disjointed and haphazard.

This analysis also leads to several particular observations about the potential state role in coordinated education reform. First, state support for districts must be differentiated according to district size and need. States must understand that districts are in different places in their development, with different levels of capacity, different performance levels, and different student population compositions. Thus, while states may demand that districts confront important problems, they should support districts to devise their own responses. Second, states are well positioned to act as clearinghouses for information about external support providers. With a broader perspective on the market of education-support providers, states are well situated to collect, organize, and disseminate information about the education services provided by private and nonprofit groups. Third, states can facilitate district networks on topics of district and school interest. Because of the pace of district work, district leaders rarely get the opportunity to interact on an ongoing basis with other district leaders around common issues and challenges. Going beyond short workshops, states can help deepen the work of districts by fostering cross-district networks and communities of practice that engage district leaders in discussions around implementation issues of their chosen improvement strategies. Fourth, states could help districts with problem identification, the process of searching for effective

solutions to address the identified problems, and the analysis of the identified programs and services. Finally, states could broker with providers on services of interest to districts. Going even further, states could broker with providers for services offered to their districts.

Towards a System of Coordinated Education Reform

Classrooms and schools must always be at the center of improvement efforts because any hope to improve student outcomes lies where students, teachers, and materials interact (Cohen & Ball, 1999). As I have argued, districts play an essential role in assisting schools and teachers in their improvement efforts because of their unique position in the political hierarchy of American education—their involvement with both schools and the community. However, because of the limitations of district capacity to address the range of support responsibilities that schools require (for an enumeration, see Supovitz, 2006, Chapter 7), the contributions of other education support organizations are integral. The federal government, states, universities, and private providers all have essential roles in providing the capacity necessary to support broad-scale educational improvement. One of the major impediments to improvement in the prevailing decentralized system is that we lack any coordination between these major education support providers.

The major contributors that provide support services for school improvement and contribute to building educational capacity in the current system are shown in Figure 1. Each of these players influences the instructional and support systems of schools, which are placed at the center of the diagram to represent their primacy in efforts to best educate youths. Each of these contributors plays an important role. The federal government sets broad educational policy, encourages attention to equity and fairness, and provides funding to local schools and invests substantially in research and development. States set standards, develop assessments and specific accountability systems, sponsor some local capacity building (through regional resource centers), and are an important source of education funding for local schools. Districts, as aforementioned, set the vision for local educational emphasis, work closely with schools to select and enact curricula, support school capacity building, and use data for instructional improvement, program evaluation, and accountability purposes. Universities are a major source of both teacher and school leader development as well as educational theory and innovation. External providers are often on the leading edge in curriculum, professional development, materials, technological advances, and other programmatic developments. Each of these education support organizations provides very real resources and capacity that have the potential to help schools meet the challenges of educating students in the 21st century.

Figure 1. The constellation of education support providers.
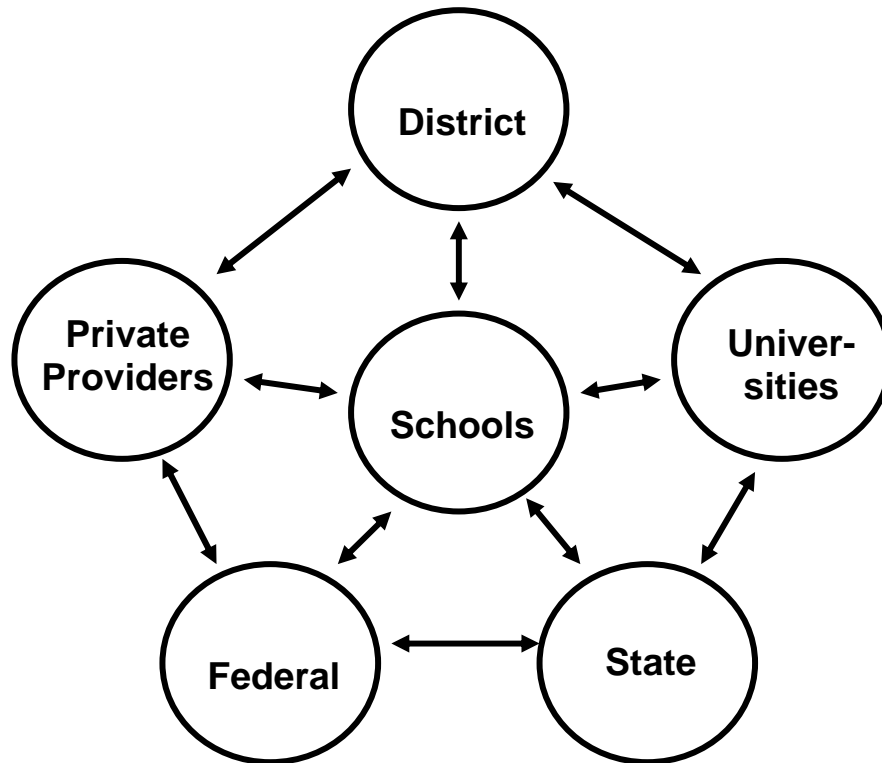
Yet, in spite of all of this available capacity in support of school improvement, there is very little concerted sense of how all these players fit together to create a coordinated system of education dedicated to steady improvement in the quality of instruction and support services for children. While this framework offers a vision for coordinated education reform, it lacks both specificity about the roles of each of these central players as well clarity about who will orchestrate their joint efforts.

Ironically, no entity in the current constellation of education support providers has the position and capacity to coordinate the array of support available to schools. Should districts be the central coordinators of resources in the education system? In their current condition, they lack the capacity to play such a role. States are less well positioned and also lack the capacity to manage the range of resources available to support school improvement, although state intermediate units or regional centers are potentially a place that coordination might occur. Universities hold an influential position in the education support environment, but their interests and incentives are too eclectic to think they could play this disciplined service role. The partnerships developed by the NSF's SSI programs offer an alluring image of how targeted seed money might produce a different type of organization whose mission it is to coordinate the available resources in a state and identify the gaps in those resources for helping schools and districts to better support student performance. However, the difficulties they had bringing stakeholders together suggests that this model needs refining.

The Challenge of Coordinated Education Reform

The decentralized nature of American education has produced the current uncoordinated system. Improving the coordination of education reform requires that we rethink the configuration of the current education system. A central issue confronting policymakers as they construct the public education system to improve student outcomes is determining what entity will coordinate the capacity that currently exists. A tremendous amount of effort is expended on supporting public schools to better prepare students for the global economy and the demands of citizenship in a technological society. While certainly more capacity is needed at every level, much of the effort that is expended dissipates due to poor coordination of these scarce resources.

The past decade of education reform has highlighted the promise of systemic reform in building a structure of standards and accountability to provide guidance, goals, and incentives to American schools. Yet the capacity part of the equation has thus far not been addressed, much less harnessed, in support of this structure. While progress over the last decade has been achieved with great difficulty, the building of capacity at different levels of the system and coordination of that capacity represent an even more daunting challenge.

There is much experience and the track record of smaller scale efforts that can help educators rethink the challenge of coordinated education reform. Those who have studied coalition building and similar efforts to bring together different constituencies in support of a single goal should have something to contribute on the subject. The experiences of those funded to implement NSF's systemic initiatives in the 1990s and those who studied these initiatives would also be a valuable resource for improving the coordination of capacity, although I am unaware of any research on the capacity-building efforts of the systemic initiatives.

Additionally, there are a few other noteworthy endeavors in the field that are attempting to coordinate reform efforts and from which there is much to learn. A good example is the Wallace Foundation's effort to develop an integrated system for building school leadership. Wallace has undertaken a systematic review of a range of issues associated with school leadership, including leadership support, mentoring, leadership development efforts, leadership standards, redesign of university preparation programs, licensure, internships, and how leadership influences student learning. Wallace also funds innovative district and school leadership development efforts as well as instruments to measure leadership efficacy. This experience has culminated in an integrated model for school leadership, called Leadership for Learning, in which the foundation articulates a coordinated approach to effective school leadership. The model specifies both state and district roles for standards, training, and conditions, in support of effective school leadership (Wallace Foundation, 2006). The building and coordination of efforts to support educational improvement is a critical topic with which educational policymakers, researchers, and practitioners must grapple.

At the outset of this paper I presented different arguments about which education support organization was best situated to build the capacity of teachers and school leaders to provide high-quality learning experiences for all students. The market, federal

government, states, and districts all have advocates that point to their importance in supporting educational improvement. In this paper I have argued that none of these education support providers alone offers the solution; rather, all working in concert will bring about better outcomes. The next critical questions facing policymakers are to figure out what each education support organization does best, how to make their knowledge and expertise more readily available, and how to coordinate their resources. The difficult challenges of public education require both more capacity and better coordination between the capacity providers that exist. Several critical questions then follow: Should we take a top-down or more collaborative approach to the problem? Should we view this as a fleet of education providers in need of an admiral or an educational orchestra in search of a conductor? Or is some other metaphor more appropriate? The way in which we bolster and coordinate the capacity in the system to address the difficult educational challenges that lie ahead may well determine which course American education follows across this century.

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