

*The Case for  
District-Based  
Reform*

*Leading, Building, and Sustaining  
School Improvement*

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# *Introduction*

Local control of education is a distinctly American ideal. In virtually no other country does the local community maintain so much influence over the form, function, and funding of schooling. As a result, there are almost sixteen thousand school districts in the United States (Hoffman & Sable, 2006), and their diversity is astonishing. The vast majority of these districts are tiny; almost two-thirds of them have fewer than fifteen hundred students—the enrollment of a fair-sized urban middle school. Only about 3 percent of U.S. school districts have enrollments of more than fifteen thousand, yet this 3 percent educates nearly 45 percent of America’s public school students!

Along with local control comes local responsibility for results. If you look at the achievement within any of these midsize to large (i.e., over fifteen thousand students) districts, you will likely find marked disparities in student performance that cannot be explained solely by differences in socioeconomic status. In other words, even within the same school district, there are schools performing well and others faring poorly. How can we explain these differences? What is happening in some schools that is not happening in others? These differences are in substantial part due to variations in instructional emphasis and in the quality of teaching across schools. So, whose job is it to ensure that the quality of instruction is uniformly high in all schools within a system? This is the job of the school district.

My overarching argument in this book is that school district leaders who wish to improve the performance of *all* students within their system must make a concerted effort to employ the central lever that is in their power to improve student learning—the fulcrum of instructional improvement. This approach is distinguishable from the more common scenario in which district leaders, for all intents and purposes, cede instructional authority to school leaders, who in turn may pass it on to individual teachers. The result

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of this vacuum of instructional leadership at the district level is huge variability in the quality of learning opportunities children receive from school to school and from classroom to classroom. Hence the inequities in student opportunities to learn.

Now make no mistake, the problem of variable instructional quality is complex, and not readily solvable by simple remedies or top-down solutions. If it were easy to correct, then smart, goodhearted people would have done so already. But American education is a peculiar institution, with its own distinctive history, particular organizational characteristics, and singular culture. In such an environment, the influence of a central authority on dispersed classrooms is tenuous. Strong-arm efforts have traditionally failed to improve teaching and learning and would likely fail if tried again. So, are there viable alternative approaches that help district leaders have a strong influence on instructional practice in classrooms across school systems?

District leaders approach the task of wide-scale instructional improvement in many ways. Perhaps the most common approach is to adopt a range of curricula across different subject areas and then provide training and support for those materials. In another popular approach, district leaders require schools to choose from a set of external school reform models. Some district leaders may attempt to guide teachers' inquiry into their own instructional practice and its relationship to their students' learning. Still others develop their own particular vision of instructional quality and focus their efforts around that vision. This is by no means an exhaustive list of strong district support strategies, but it provides some examples of how district leaders attempt to improve teaching and learning across a school system.

All of these theories of action have been the subjects of natural experiments in education. The first approach of curricular adoption has been criticized because of weak district influence and lack of coherence across grades and content areas (Fuhrman, 1993). Supported by New American Schools, several urban districts, including Memphis, San Antonio, and Cincinnati, pursued the second approach by encouraging all schools to adopt comprehensive school reform models. Evaluations of these efforts indicated large variability in the effectiveness of the approaches and raised questions about the district's ability to support such widely differing philosophical approaches to school improvement (Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002). The third approach, fostering more intimate inquires into instructional improvement,

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is being undertaken in Trenton, New Jersey, by superintendent James Lytle (2002). While this approach has the advantages of encouraging reform to grow deeper roots and teachers and school leaders to take more ownership, it raises questions about the pace of reform and the districts' ability to support diverse approaches.

In this book I examine the implications of the fourth approach—the articulation and enactment of a unifying vision of instructional quality while maintaining some level of local flexibility. I explore the promises and pitfalls for district leaders who seek to infuse a distinct conception of what instruction should look like within classrooms and across a system, even as they encourage local choice and commitment. With this book I also intend to add to and build upon the tradition of researchers who have shined a spotlight on effective districts. This work focuses on one site—Duval County, Florida—that has achieved notable success. A critical examination of that site's experience may provide insights from which other district leaders might profit.

More specifically, this book has two layers of purpose. At one level my intentions are to tell the story of how Duval County leaders developed their vision and system of instructional improvement that produced districtwide learning gains. Like most such stories, Duval County's is a meandering one, full of promising ideas and false starts, strokes of genius and folly, and both intended and unintended consequences. An analysis of the implications of some key decisions of Duval County leaders reveals some of the tensions and tradeoffs implicit in their choices. Therefore, if other education leaders are to learn from this story, they must hear about not just the ultimate shape of the system but also the process and decisions that contributed to molding it into its current form.

My second purpose in writing this book is to extrapolate beyond Duval County's experience and use these lessons to consider new ways of conceiving of the school district as a stronger support organization for widespread instructional improvement in schools. I believe that if the school district is to have a future in American education, we must rethink its role and responsibilities within the present educational environment and re-conceptualize its tasks and functions to provide stronger support for teaching and learning in schools. Districts can play a powerful role in supporting school improvement if they reposition themselves both internally to the schools they serve and externally to the greater educational environment. Internally, districts

must develop a reciprocal relationship with schools, exchanging a commitment to capacity-building for accountability. Externally, districts must develop the capacity to scan the broader educational environment and negotiate relationships with external providers in order to enhance the expertise within their systems. Perhaps most important, districts must evolve into organizations that explore instructional problems more systematically in order to build their own knowledge base, and thus to improve teaching across their systems.

My familiarity with education reform in Duval County comes from many years working in the district. Since 1999 I have been the principal investigator of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education's (CPRE) national evaluation of the America's Choice comprehensive school reform model, and it is through that evaluation that I first began to do fieldwork in Duval County. In 2000, district leaders asked CPRE to conduct a separate, more intensive evaluation of their standards-based reform efforts because the America's Choice evaluation was not providing them with sufficient feedback on either implementation or performance in their schools. Even while CPRE conducted more concentrated fieldwork in Duval County, we continued to include the district's schools in our America's Choice evaluation reports, including those on instructional leadership (Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001), literacy workshop implementation (Bach & Supovitz, 2003; Supovitz, Poglinco, & Bach, 2002), instructional coaching (Poglinco et al., 2003), data use (Supovitz & Klein, 2003), and student impact studies (Supovitz, Poglinco, & Snyder, 2001; Supovitz, Taylor, & May, 2002).

Beginning in 2002, it gradually became clear that Duval County leaders were developing something special in the district that transcended the implementation of America's Choice. At that point the idea for this book began to take shape, and I became more systematic in my efforts to study the district's standards-based reform efforts. In that year I conducted fieldwork in a representative sample of ten schools in the district and continued my extensive interviews with district leaders and documentation of their work. I also continued to provide technical assistance to the district in its development of an instructional implementation monitoring system and conducted research on the influences of the system (Supovitz & Weathers, 2004).

This book is unlike other district research in several important respects. First, rather than just identifying key components of district support, I con-

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sider the merits and constraints of each component within a broader framework. Second, rather than identifying a district that has performed better than its peers and then looking back to understand why its results were different, this research follows a district throughout its reform implementation. Consequently, I am able to capture the uneven process of implementation rather than just the ultimate destination. This longitudinal method allows me to discuss the decisions, dilemmas, tensions, and uncertainties that are part of the journey. In this sense, I think this work breaks new ground in exploring the decisions of an effective district's sojourn and the implications of those decisions. Third, my ambition is to use Duval County's experience to consider a reconfiguration of the district role in supporting systemwide improvement in the twenty-first century. While districts have long handled the managerial functions of supporting schools—delivering textbooks to classrooms, getting the buses to run on schedule, maintaining school buildings—supporting the improvement of teaching and learning has been a thornier challenge.

The chapters of this book are loosely organized around the four central components of a theory of action for strong district support for systemwide improvement of teaching and learning. These are:

1. Developing a specific vision of what high-quality instruction should look like inside classrooms.
2. Building both the commitment and the capacity of employees across the system to enact and support the instructional vision.
3. Constructing mechanisms to provide data at all levels of the system that will be used both to provide people with information that informs their practices and to monitor the implementation of the instructional vision.
4. Developing a means to help people continually deepen their implementation and to help the district continually refine this vision and understand its implications.

These four central ideas are explored throughout this book. In chapter 1 I review the historical district role, as well as more recent district efforts to improve instructional quality. I then introduce Duval County's reform efforts and review the impacts its efforts have had on student performance. Chapter 2 establishes the central importance of district leaders developing a vision of instructional quality as a way to focus attention on the organi-

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zational mission of improving teaching and learning and providing a focal point for reform efforts. Chapter 3 explores the twin challenges of spurring commitment and developing capacity to enact an instructional vision. Chapter 4 examines how teachers and schools reacted to and implemented the instructional practices advocated by Duval County leaders and explores the rationale behind peoples' choices. Chapter 5 conceptualizes a system of districtwide data use and examines Duval County's use of various forms of data. Chapter 6 focuses on the challenge of sustaining reform and the utility of organizational learning mechanisms to do so. Chapter 7 extrapolates beyond the experiences of Duval County to examine the utility of districts in today's educational constellation and to reconsider how the school district can most effectively support the improvement of teaching and learning across its school system. In chapter 8 I propose a reconceptualization of the school district for the twenty-first century.

Sustained instructional emphasis and its systematic support is a tall order, one not easily achieved. Yet if districts are not willing and able to rise to the challenge of supporting systemwide improvements in teaching and expanding learning opportunities for all students, then perhaps it is time to think of other types and/or combinations of educational support organizations that can do this job more effectively. If we are to improve the quality of education for our citizenry in the twenty-first century, the capacity to do this must come from local educational support organizations.

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