



Indicator: The district allows school leaders reasonable autonomy to do things differently in order to succeed. (5633)

Explanation: The research literature in education as well as other sectors confirms the need for leaders in these organizations to make decisions necessary for change. Spelling out the boundaries for this autonomy is critical, and decision making may be extended to a school Leadership Team as well as the key administrators. Typically, flexibility is applied especially to decisions about schedules, budgetary allocation, and personnel hiring and replacement.

Questions: How does your district determine the degree and kind of autonomy it grants to school leaders? Are leaders given sufficient authority in decisions about schedules, budgets, and personnel? Is the role of the school Leadership Team defined?

A challenge of district-based reform with clear expectations for school- and classroom-level accountability is developing a balance between district control and flexibility needed at the school level. Such flexibility also requires explicit efforts to “spread” leadership and build leadership skills in school staff.

High-performing school districts recognized that culture as well as processes might need to change to build leadership capacity at the school level. By demonstrating that everyone’s ideas are valued, central office staff stimulates the development of potentially helpful approaches and suggestions.

This may come about through district initiatives such as curriculum alignment efforts. By providing opportunities for teachers to work together and then using the products they develop in very public ways, the leadership base begins to broaden. In addition, participation helps teachers develop skills in areas such as group processes that can be taken back to their schools and used to strengthen school improvement efforts.

This principle is also inextricably tied to strong central office leadership. Spreading leadership to the school level must begin with selling the vision of high expectations for student achievement. Principals in high-performing districts talked of coming to the realization that the ultimately successful improvement effort – in contrast with those they had experienced before – was not a case of “this too shall pass.” This level of buy in is an integral part of efforts to spread leadership to the school level.

Another key element is the development of a clear understanding of district expectations for schools – as well as the parameters of school autonomy. While the focus of school efforts toward district goals must be nonnegotiable, each district will need to determine and clearly communicate to school personnel the types of decisions they are authorized to make about resource allocation and staff assignments. These parameters may be different in different districts. In addition, a district may decide to provide more latitude for schools demonstrating high or improving student achievement than for those making little to no progress.

A critical point – school staff cannot be expected to engage in improvement efforts that may substantially change

their daily work lives without support. Helping staff members, especially teachers, acquire needed skills creates an important spiral effect. They are better able to fill their newly defined roles – and with success comes increased confidence and willingness to move outside a closed-door model toward increased participation in school- and district-level improvement efforts.

To do this, districts will likely find they need to shift central office staff responsibilities from oversight to providing much needed expertise directly to schools. Central office staff will also need to work at a macro level to increase staff effectiveness. An example might be the identification of “best practices” already in use in a school or classroom, followed by the development of a process to extend use of such practices elsewhere in the district.

Source: Gordon Cawelti & Nancy Protheroe, *Handbook on Restructuring and Substantial School Improvement*

NWREL (2000), Hassel et al. (2006), Leverett (2004), Appelbaum (2002), and Redding (2006) all offer recommendations for how districts can create optimum conditions for successful restructuring and substantial improvement. These include:

- Putting the right leader in each school
- Committing sufficient resources (time, money, staff, professional development, data support)
- Giving schools the freedom they need to make changes in instruction, organization, and scheduling even if those conflict with established district procedures
- Reorganizing district operations for a unified, coherent focus on support of instructional improvement, rather than compliance with district mandates
- Providing information on restructuring alternatives and assistance in dealing with contractors and holding them accountable
- Assigning each school a specially trained central office staff member who can serve as an effective liaison and resource to the school, rather than an enforcer or commanding officer
- Helping schools gather and use data

- Equitably allocating financial and staff resources
- Requiring accountability for both district and school staff and addressing failure promptly
- Creating a pipeline of turnaround leaders
- Facilitating professional networks and professional development tailored to each school’s needs
- Providing schools with control over their own budgets
- Soliciting meaningful input from schools
- Building community support for change

Source: Carole Perlman, In Walberg, *Handbook on Restructuring and Substantial School Improvement*. Retrieved from www.adi.org. See Download ADI Publications.

Create the right environment for leaders of restructuring organizations. The most critical environmental factors include:

- **Freedom to act** very differently from past organizational practice and from other organizational units. Organizations that achieve dramatic improvements shun enormous temptations to let efficiency, consistency, prior relationships, staff, customer and community preferences, and political concerns trump what’s best for organizational results. They make big changes that work, even when inconvenient or uncomfortable.
- **Accountability** that is clear, frequently tracked, and publicly reported. If measurement systems are inadequate, improving them rather than failing to monitor is the solution for success.
- **Timeframes** that allow plenty of time for planning changes but very short timetables to demonstrate success on a limited number of targeted goals. Successful, big changes all get results fast. Results should be clear after one year. Speedy support of successful strategies and quick elimination of failed strategies happens only when timeframes are short. Longer term work is required to extend success and make it sustainable, but the initial burst of achievement is a hallmark of successful efforts at dramatic improvement.
- **Support that helps without hijacking** organiza-



tions' freedom to do things very differently. In the school context, financial, human resource, technical, data, and other service support from the district is critical, as is coordination among these functions when needed to allow deviations by a school in restructuring. But help should be provided with great care not to compromise changes that school leaders need to make (e.g., in how money is spent, school schedule, curriculum, teaching approach, student progress monitoring, and the like).

Source: Bryan Hassel, Emily Hassel, Lauren Morando Rhim, In Walberg, *Handbook on Restructuring and Substantial School Improvement*. Retrieved from www.adi.org. See Download ADI Publications.

References and Resources

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