

Diversity in the middle: Broadening Perspectives on Intermediary Levels of School System Improvement

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In the North American literature on school system administration and improvement the word 'school district' conjures up images of an organizational entity that exists in-between government education authorities and local schools, and that is politically and administratively responsible for managing and supporting distinct sets of schools within a specific geographically defined jurisdiction. Historically, these school districts have been governed by locally elected school boards. These elected officials, in turn, set local education policies within the parameters of government policies, and hire district and school administrators, teachers, and professional support personnel to manage and deliver educational programs and services in the schools to students of families within that community (Elmore, 1993; Tyack, 2002). Although there is considerable variety in the governance, organization, and size of school districts, much of the literature on school districts and their role in educational reform and improvement has tended to treat them as a common organizational form. The major thesis of this commentary and reflection on the preceding papers is that there is a need to recognize that "school districts" as known in the United States are examples of a more general phenomenon of intermediary organizational entities in education systems in North America and elsewhere in the world (Mourshed, Chijoke & Barber, 2010), and that there is a need to problematize, not take for granted, the form, purpose, and influence of these mediating layers of the school system on the quality and improvement of schools, and on the implementation of government policies that are intended to regulate and support education in schools.

In the United States, talk and research about school districts has been largely limited to geographically defined intermediary units of organization and governance within the K-12 public school systems. Outside the United States, geography is one but not necessarily the sole criteria for defining the jurisdiction of school districts. In the Province of Ontario, Canada, where I live, there are 72 school districts governing four publicly-funded parallel school systems defined by religious background (secular Public, Catholic public) and the primary language of instruction (English, French). The geographic boundaries of districts within each system vary, but collectively they each cover the entire province. In the province of Quebec there are publicly-funded English language and French language school districts serving different families within the same geographic regions. In the province of Newfoundland all districts were affiliated with particular religious denominations until the provincial government mandated a controversial end to the historically differentiated faith-based system of public education in 1998. Historically, primary and secondary schools in the United States and Canada were governed and managed by distinct school district organizations. Though this form of district organization has largely been replaced by unified districts governing both primary and secondary school education in North America, it remains common in many other countries, particularly in the developing world. In sum, the jurisdictional scope of intermediary organizational units that we refer to as school districts is politically, not just geographically, defined in terms of the communities and schools they serve. This can have consequences for district policy and purpose in relation to the schools and communities they serve, for district relations with external government educational policy and authorities, as well as to the

organization of district operations. The political bases of school districts are largely unexplored in the literature on school district level leadership and support for improving the quality of schools.

Several years ago I collaborated in a national study of educational leadership and its links to learning funded by the Wallace Foundation in the United States (Louis et al, 2010; Leithwood & Louis (Ed.), 2011). Our study sampled 43 school districts across nine states. The districts ranged from large (over 25,000 students), to medium (2,500 to 24,999 students), to small (under 2,500 students). At the time we began our study less than 2% of the approximately 14,000 schools districts in the United States served more than 25,000 students (though they accounted for about 1/3 of the student population). Notwithstanding ongoing political pressures towards amalgamation, large numbers of schools districts are very small (over 1000 schools districts in Texas, over 500 districts in Nebraska). Two rural districts in our study, for example, served less than a 1000 students, and consisted of little more than a district office led by a Superintendent and one or two professional staff (e.g., responsible for all curriculum-related matters and/or special education and federal programs), one high school and two or three elementary/middle schools. While one can find case studies of leadership and reform in smaller districts (e.g. see Cawelti and Protheroe, 2001; Louis, Thomas & Anderson, 2010), research on school districts and their role in school improvement is dominated by investigations of large urban school districts, often in very challenging socio-economic circumstances. In fact, the literature is peppered with recurring accounts of a relatively small number of large urban districts, some because of the controversial ways in which they have tackled the daunting challenges of persistently low performance in high poverty contexts, such as Chicago (Bryk et al, 2010) and New York City and Los Angeles (see articles by Wolhstetter & Smith and by Marsh, Strunk & Bush in this issue). Others have been repeatedly studied because of their enduring academic success in challenging contexts, such as Aldine ISD in Texas (e.g, Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Zadavsky, 2009). In what ways the characteristics of “effective” school districts (see Trujillo in this volume) derived from investigations of urban districts apply to educators working in the large numbers of small public school districts remains largely unexplored. Due to their lack of professional capacity in terms of human resources and expertise at the central office level, for example, many of these districts depend on professional support from regional education service centers created and partially funded by their States and from connections to local universities. Perhaps we need to be think about intermediary level support systems for school improvement that include school district links with varied external agencies. Call it a school district-plus approach to support for improvement in school quality.

Whether in the United States or elsewhere in the world, there are thousands of independent community and faith-based systems of schools that are governed, managed and supported by private authorities that perform many of the same functions as district offices within the public education system. In the ongoing search for effective ways of organizing and supporting school quality and improvement to systems of schools these independent school systems have been essentially ignored. I have collaborated in research and leadership development with educational divisions of the Aga Khan Development Network (e.g., Aga Khan Foundation, Aga Khan Education Services, Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development). Aga Khan Education Services (AKES) operates systems of independent schools in Africa, South and Central Asia. In Pakistan, for example, the system includes 192

schools serving 36,000 students and 1,600 teachers, with both central and regional offices and support services. They have been intensively involved in school improvement initiatives since 1983 serving both AKES schools and surrounding public and community-based schools (Greenland, 2002). Compared to public schools, independent school systems typically have different relationships to government education policies in regards to curriculum, teacher qualifications, governance, accountability, and even funding. They still operate, however, within the parameters though not direct control of those policies. In that sense, they exist as an intermediate level of school system organization similar to school districts within the public education domain. Where is the comparative research on governance and support for improvement within the independent school sector in North America and elsewhere in the world? Is it possible that they have created alternative ways of developing and supporting educational quality that would be worth incorporating into the knowledge base and discussions about school districts?

Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) models burst on to the education scene in the United States in the late 1980s (Murphy & Datnow, 2003). Some widely adopted CSR models include Success for All, Accelerated Schools, the Comer School Development Model, the Coalition of Essential Schools, Paedeia schools, and the Modern Red School House. The CSR movement started as a series of independent school improvement projects initiated by education scholar/activists at several major universities, such as Robert Slavin at Johns Hopkins, Henry Levin at Stanford, and James Comer at Yale. Many were targeted specifically at low performing schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged families. The models typically consist not only designs for curriculum, teaching, learning, and internal management of the schools, but also of external support for implementation from the developers. Once federal and in some instances state funding became available to support the adoption of CSR models at the local level in the 1990s, their numbers mushroomed dramatically. Some school districts promoted the adoption of multiple CSR models by low performing schools as a system improvement strategy, although the district offices had to rely on professional expertise from the developers to support the models (Stringfield et al 1998; Togneri & Lazarus, 2003). There have been numerous comparative and case study investigations and evaluations of the implementation and effectiveness of various CSR models (e.g., Stringfield, 2000; Datnow, Hubbard & Mehan, 2002; Thiessen & Anderson, 1999). These studies have focused on implementation of the models and student outcomes. Little has been written about the organization and strategies embodied in the external support systems (Datnow, Mehan & Hubbard, 2002). Some, such as Success for All and Accelerated Schools, established complex central and regional support systems and networks for initial and continuous training for school leaders and for teachers, technical assistance, and ongoing refinement of the models drawing upon experiences and feedback from participating schools. Practically speaking, CSR developers act as another kind of intermediary organization serving multiple schools, but the schools they serve are dispersed across multiple districts, and typically exceed the number of schools served by even medium and large-sized districts in the country. Most accounts of school district effectiveness, even in systems that have promoted CSR adoption, do not fully take into account the external support activities for school improvement of the CSR support systems. The CSR phenomenon was in many respects a precursor of the contemporary charter school movement in the United States. And while charter schools began as individual school initiatives within the public school system, we have also witnessed the emergence of systems of charter schools implementing whole school designs that are managed and supported by

external Educational Management Organizations (EMOs). The EMOs are similar to CSR developer support systems, though they may incorporate a profit-making motive. While their presence is noted in the context of some contemporary school district improvement efforts (e.g., Wohlstetter, Datnow & Park, 2008; Boyd, Christman & Useem, 2008), EMOs have not been well studied as alternative intermediate level support systems. What could we learn about intermediate level support systems for school improvement from CSR and EMO organizations independently or in partnership with districts?

Two articles in this volume (Wohlstetter & Smith and by Marsh, Strunk & Bush) illustrate the emergence of a “new” approach to school district organization and support for the delivery and the improvement of public education in the United States, commonly referred to as portfolio or diverse provider districts. This alternative form of school district organization and services is rooted in the experiences of the CSR and charter school movements. The basic idea is that while school district authorities retain responsibility and accountability for schools within their jurisdiction, the district contracts with and transfers public funds to other agencies to manage and deliver education services at the school level. Schools operated by external providers are typically granted greater autonomy over the allocation of school budgets, staffing, school organization, and in some cases even the curriculum. In theory this is supposed to provide greater freedom at the school level to create innovative and better ways of educating students, particularly those from challenging socio-economic backgrounds in persistently low performing schools. Portfolio districts may include a mix of charter schools, sets of schools run by EMOs, and traditional schools that continue to operate directly under district authority and the district support system. As described by Wohlstetter and Smith, New York City’s Children’s First Networks also require all schools, including those not run by a non-district agent, to choose from alternative external support providers. Notwithstanding expectations of inter-school collaboration associated with the CFN network structure in New York, their research raises questions about the degree of school-to-school interaction in the pursuit of school improvement. More detailed information about the portfolio strategy and portfolio districts can be obtained from the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington (cpre@u.washington.edu) and several edited texts of case studies and commentaries (e.g., Boyd, Kerchner & Blyth, 2008; Buckley, Henig & Levin, 2010). The emergence of portfolio districts is controversial, particularly when it is initiated in contexts of district takeover by states, mayoral control, and the dissolution of traditionally elected school boards and unions as active partners in school district governance (Giroux, 2011). Marsh, Strunk and Bush’s report in this issue on the early years of the Public School Choice Initiative in Los Angeles also challenges the expectations of portfolio advocates concerning the quality and diversity of proposals for participation in diverse provider systems. Evidence that turning schools over to alternative providers actually leads to better academic results is disputable when subjected to serious methodological scrutiny, even in districts like Philadelphia and New York that have been at it for some time (Boyd, Christman & Useem, 2008; Fruchter, 2008). Ultimately, the future of the portfolio strategy of school district administration and delivery of education may rest less on evidence of results than on political ideologies and shifting control over education finances that enable private interests to gain increasing access to public funds allocated to support public education.

While authorities and educators in the United States experiment with variations on public-private partnerships in education, such as portfolio strategy districts, other new kinds of intermediary level school governance and support systems have arisen in other parts of the world, most notably England. Over the past decade the traditional English equivalent of school districts, referred to as Local Education Authorities (LEAs), have undergone significant change. On the one hand, they have been reconstituted as multi-service providers with responsibilities for multiple social services, not just education. On the other hand, schools have been granted greater autonomy from the LEAs and have been provided legal authority and even financial incentives from the government to partner up with other schools in various types of school-to-school networks or “chains of schools”, variously referred to as federations, academies, and education trusts. Only high performing schools, for example, can earn the status of academies. Academy schools are expected to team up with and serve as lead schools for lower performing neighboring schools. A group of schools may be led by an executive head from an academy, and the associated schools may seek greater efficiencies for some services through joint action. A key feature of these new chains of schools is that the schools mutually support one another, rather than depending upon direction and central support services from the traditional local education authority. They are still subject, however, to the national accountability and inspection system. Hill (2010) provides a useful recent overview of the phenomenon of emerging chains of schools in England.

This issue of the *Journal of Educational Administration* presents a series of papers that highlight different aspects and contemporary trends in school district practice and research – organizational characteristics associated with district effectiveness (see Trujillo this issue), how districts are responding to political and public demands for accountability (see Hamilton et al. this issue), the invention of school district authorities as portfolio managers of diverse school provider systems (see Marsh et al. this issue), and how social communication networks linking school and district staff interface with the use of evidence to support school improvement (see Finnigan, Daly & Che as well as Wohlstetter & Smith this issue). The simple thesis of my commentary is to argue that school districts function as an intermediate level of education governance, management, and support within national and state education systems, and that current research and discussion on the school district role in improving and sustaining the quality of education would be strengthened by broadening the scope of research and discussion to alternative kinds of intermediate level governance and support systems that exist in North America and in other regions of the world.

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