Leadership and Collaboration in Complex Organizations: Principals’ Interactions With Central Office in Two Large School Districts

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Leadership and Collaboration in Complex Organizations:
Principals’ Interactions with Central Office in Two Large School Districts

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Abstract

There is increasing pressure on the central office, particularly in large school districts, to improve student outcomes across schools and to close large achievement gaps between groups of students based largely on race and income (Louis, 2008; Honig 2012). Reforms intended to “raise the bar and close the gap” in student achievement are often implemented at the intersection of central office and schools. However, these efforts often do not achieve their intended outcomes. In this context, it is essential to understand the conditions under which reforms targeting the central office-school relationship succeed or fail. Given the pressing need for improved approaches to managing school systems, my dissertation explores the relationship between school leaders and central offices in two large, urban districts in Maryland. I use a qualitative inquiry strategy that incorporates interviews and document review to construct case studies of principals’ interactions with central office in the two districts. (Yin, 2013). I then use the framework of loose coupling theory (Orton & Weick, 1990; Wieck, 1976) to interpret the conditions under which the central office-school relationship leads to consistent or variable practices across schools.

In the case studies, I examine three essential functions—budgeting, staffing, and academic programming—shared between principals and central office (Johnson, Marietta, Higgins, Mapp, & Grossman, 2015). I found that the two school districts took fundamentally different approaches—one centralized and the other decentralized—to managing their relationships with schools in the three functions. As a result, principals in each district had very different interactions with central office as they carried out their work. Examining these interactions through the lens of loose coupling theory sheds light
on whether the districts’ approaches worked as intended. Under some conditions, the approaches worked as expected (e.g. centralization produced tight coupling). However, in other cases, the approach did not (e.g. centralization led to loose coupling). Two factors appeared to matter the most in determining whether an approach worked as intended: the capacity of principals and principals’ perceptions of the capacity of central office. Findings from the research show the importance of matching the district’s approach to capacities of those responsible for implementation.
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

More children enter classrooms in each of 100 largest school districts in the United States districts than the entire school systems of Canada, Finland, and Singapore, combined (Sable, Plotts, & Mitchell, 2010). Yet, these large systems tend to have a disproportionate number of inexperienced teachers, often lack the infrastructure and facilities needed for a productive learning environment, and have predictably lower academic performance and graduation rates when compared to their smaller-sized peers (Kincheloe, 2010). The same characteristics that make large school districts difficult to manage—size, historically low performance, and large concentrations of low-income students and English language learners—also make them critical to progressing towards an equitable and just society.

The challenges that large districts face are difficult, but not impossible, to address. There are examples of excellent schools in nearly all struggling districts. The elusive goal has been to achieve high performance at scale, districtwide. Indeed, inconsistent outcomes across schools in the same district are recognized as a particular challenge in large school systems (Fullan, 2007; Levin, 2008). Over the last two decades, this uneven school performance, coupled with large achievement gaps between groups of students, based largely on race and income, has led policy makers to revisit the role of the central office (Louis, 2008; Trujillo, 2013). Central office administrators have primary responsibility for interpreting and implementing policies and reforms intended to improve performance and address inequities across schools (Honig, 2013). Its interactions with schools, especially principals, ultimately determine whether those policies or reforms
achieve their objectives. Those in central office in large school systems have an even greater challenge of implementing reforms across schools serving diverse communities with very different needs and capacities. In this context, the relationships between the central office and schools have become more critical, with the idea that enhancing the management and leadership of large school districts may offer tremendous potential to improve student learning at scale.

Despite the recent focus on the role of central office in promoting student achievement, researchers note that the relationship between central office and schools remains largely unexplored (e.g. Louis, 2008; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Saltman, 2010; Honig, 2012; Johnson, Marietta, Higgins, Mapp, & Grossman, 2015). Research on the work of teachers and principals in schools tends to ignore the role of the central office, while studies of the central office often neglect how schools operate. This “zoned” approach often links central office activities to student achievement gains without examining the processes that shape the relationships and enable associated outcomes (Louis, 2008; Trujillo, 2013).

**Purpose of the Study**

Given the pressing need for improved approaches to managing large school systems, my dissertation research explores the relationship between the central office and schools in two large, urban districts in Maryland. The two districts—Baltimore City Schools and Montgomery County Public Schools—take very different approaches to managing the central office-schools relationship. Baltimore emphasizes school autonomy by delegating many decisions in curriculum, budgeting, and staffing to principals. In contrast, Montgomery County favors a centralized decision-making process that
incorporates principals’ and teachers’ input through district-wide committees. The purpose of the study was to better understand how principals experienced these two approaches to managing the central office-school relationship. One key goal is to identify the conditions under which the relationship between central office and schools produces consistency or variability, given varying degrees of centralized and decentralized approaches. This requires examining where decisions are made and what principals believed they needed from the central office in order to be effective in their jobs. Findings from the study can be used to improve the management of school districts and help educational leaders in schools and central offices build and maintain productive relationships that improve organizational performance and student outcomes.

This work is embedded within a larger study of leadership in five urban districts conducted by Harvard University’s Public Education Leadership Project (Johnson, Marietta, Higgins, Mapp, & Grossman, 2015). The data for my dissertation comes from this Public Education Leadership Project (PELP) study and includes documents and qualitative interviews from the two districts I analyzed for my dissertation.

I used a case study design to compare principals’ interactions with central office leaders across contexts (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2013). Specifically, I explored principals’ perceptions of their interactions with central office across the two districts in the essential functions of academic programming, budgeting, and staffing. Decisions in these three functions, also called “strategic priorities,” were shared between principals and central office administrators and considered important levers for improvement (Johnson, Marietta, Higgins, Mapp, & Grossman, 2015). Furthermore, I examined that relationship within the context of many types of schools within each district (e.g.
struggling, higher-performing; elementary schools, high schools, middle-income, low-income etc.).

As a step in my analysis, I used the framework of loose coupling theory (Orton & Weick, 1990; Wieck, 1976) to understand why different approaches (e.g. centralization and decimalization) to managing the central office-school relationships did not always produce their intended outcomes. For example, I investigated the puzzle of why centralizing a decision in a particular function (e.g. budgeting) did not always produce greater consistency in how principals carried out related work, or why giving principals greater control over a decision sometimes led to less variability across schools. Loose coupling theory (LCT) enabled me to examine of outcomes—tight and loose coupling—of different approaches to managing the central office-school relationship. In general, loose coupling describes an outcome where there is a high degree of variance across schools in how work in the three functions is carried out. Tight coupling occurs when the interactions between central office and principals produce greater consistency across schools.

LCT draws attention to the link between general approaches—centralization and decentralization—and the actual outcomes of those approaches. LCT does this by using these concepts of loose coupling and tight coupling, which describe the actual outcomes of principals’ interactions with central office in a function. Sometimes the interactions lead to loose coupling or greater variation in how principals do their work; in other cases, the exchanges between principals and central office produce tight coupling or less variation across schools.
Using LCT to aid my analysis, I was able to understand how principals’ interactions with the central offices in Baltimore and Montgomery County generated different mixes of loose and tight coupling in the three functions. In doing so, I identified some of the conditions under which tight coupling (i.e., uniform, consistent) and loose coupling (i.e., varied, distinctive) emerge in the relationship between central office and schools. These insights may help scholars and practitioners understand how to manage the relationship between central office and schools more productively by differentiating approaches based on the needs of the district and those of individual schools. For example, a district where nearly all first grade students struggle to learn rare sight words may choose to implement a uniform curriculum across all schools that addresses this problem. To do so, that district would need to understand the conditions necessary to produce a tightly coupled—consistent and uniform—relationship between central office and schools in regards to the first grade literacy curriculum.

Throughout my dissertation, I use terms such as decentralization, centralization, autonomy, control, loose coupling, and tight coupling. The terms centralization, decentralization, control, and autonomy refer to a particular approach that the central office of a district takes in managing its relationship with schools. Centralization implies holding decisions at the central office with the goal of giving principals little control or autonomy over the work in the three functions. Decentralization denotes when decisions are shifted to the school level with the intent of giving principals more control or autonomy over work in the functions. The terms tight and loose coupling are distinct—but often confused with—the approaches districts take to managing the central office-school relationship. As I show, centralization does not always lead to standardized
practices or tight coupling across schools. Nor does decentralization always produce
greater variability or loose coupling across schools. Indeed, I explain the process by
which centralization can lead to loose coupling and decentralization to tight coupling.
The important distinction to make right here is that centralization and decentralization are
approaches districts take to managing the central office-school relationship. Tight and
loose coupling are the outcomes of those approaches that result from principals
interacting with central office over time. Sometimes, the approaches align with the
outcome and sometimes they do not. The factors that appeared to most affect the
alignment between approach and outcome were the capacities of principals and their
perceptions of the capacity of central office.

Research Questions

My overall goal in conducting this research is to advance the understanding of
how central offices can build and maintain productive relationships with schools.
Specifically, I address two main research questions that directly build upon the
opportunities identified in prior research and that center squarely on how principals
interact with central office:

1) How do principals describe their interactions with the central office in two
large urban school districts, in relation to academic programming, budgeting,
and staffing?

2) How do principals describe the degree of control they have over decisions
about academic programming, budgeting, and staffing?
Summary of Findings

In 2011-2012 during the time of data collection, Baltimore and Montgomery County were two large school districts that each served significant proportions of African-American and Hispanic students from low-income families. The central offices in each district managed the interactions with dozens of different types of schools, each serving a unique local community with specific needs and strengths. The two school systems operated within the same state regulatory environment and abided by the same statutes and regulations, such as state testing and accountability requirements and collective bargaining rights for public employees. Although the two districts had many similarities, there were also fundamental differences. Baltimore’s students were predominantly African-American (89%) and low-income (73% qualified for a free and/or reduced priced lunch). Montgomery County served two distinct groups of students; one group was low-income (26%) and mostly African-American (21%) and Hispanic (27%) and the other was wealthy and white (32%). Because of housing patterns, the two groups of students in Montgomery County were mostly segregated by school, so that about half of the district’s schools served most of the minority and low-income students.

Another key difference was the approach each took to managing its schools. In Baltimore, principals had garnered considerable autonomy over decisions in their schools. They controlled 80% of the budget and made nearly all decisions in teacher recruitment and hiring. For the most part, Montgomery County principals had little control over how money was spent or what curriculum was used in their schools. In comparing the relationship between central office and schools in the two districts, Baltimore’s can be described as leaning towards decentralization, which is characterized
by moving decision rights and resources to those in the schools with the goal that they
operate more autonomously within the district (Johnson, Marietta, Higgins, Mapp, &
exemplifies centralization where decision-making authority and resources are
concentrated in the central office (Johnson, Marietta, Higgins, Mapp, & Grossman,
2015).

By examining decisions in the key functions of budgeting, staffing, and academic
programming, I found that principals also had very different interactions with the central
office to carry out similar work. In Baltimore, principals interacted with the central
office primarily through a network structure composed of individuals representing
functional central office departments. Principals in Montgomery County interacted with
a mix of individuals, committees, and learning communities. The key difference between
the two districts was who or what principals interacted with in the three functions.
Despite these differences, principals in both districts described their interactions with the
central office as fulfilling three important needs. Principals said their interactions with
the central office needed to have several important features. First, the interactions had to
enable local-level leadership by allowing principals to respond to community needs.
Second, the relationship with the central office had to be flexible enough to meet diverse
school demographics. Third, principals said their interactions with the central office had
to balance accountability with guidance and support.

Using loose coupling theory (LCT) as a tool to analyze and interpret these data, I
find that there was a mix of tight and loose coupling within each function, which emerged
as principals interacted with the central office over time. Two factors seemed to have the
most influence on whether tight or loose coupling emerged. One factor was the capacity of principals in schools and the other was principals’ assessments of whether the central office was responsive to their needs. For example, tight coupling or greater consistency in practices across schools and in their relationship with central office appeared to develop when principals viewed the central office as responding effectively to their needs. Principals in Montgomery County believed the central office provided high-quality curriculum, which they said was implemented uniformly across schools. Thus, the outcome of the interaction between the central office and principals in this aspect of academic programming tipped towards being tightly coupled. There was consistency in practices across schools and in how principals interacted with the central office. Tight coupling also appeared to develop even in the context of a decentralized approach. Principals in Baltimore had significant control over the curricula used in their schools. However, as principals found central office guidance about the academic program more useful, they asked for more direction and the curricula used across schools became more consistent. The key in both these examples appeared to be principals’ perceptions that the central office was able to meet their needs in academic programming.

Loose coupling appeared to emerge from a mix of principal and central office capacity. For example, loose coupling developed when the central office gave principals more control over a decision and principals believed they had the skills and knowledge to exercise that autonomy. This is the case of the teacher hiring process in Baltimore and Montgomery County. For the most part, principals had control over whom they hired in their schools and also believed that they could identify an effective teacher during the selection process. But, it is important to note that loose coupling could also be the result
of principals devising workarounds to centralized functions, as was the case with teacher recruitment in Baltimore. Principals felt that the district’s centralized teacher recruitment process was not providing them with a qualified pool of candidates for open positions. So, some principals devised their own recruitment approaches, which produced greater variation across schools in teacher recruitment. The key point is that loose coupling seemed to emerge from two sources: 1) from the perspective of principals that the central office was not responding effectively to their needs or 2) because principals had the capacity to carry out the work on their own when given the opportunity.

Figure 1 illustrates this relationship between the district’s approach (centralization and decentralization) and coupling outcome (tight coupling and loose coupling). As shown, centralized approaches can lead to either loose or tight coupling. Similarly, tight and loose coupling can also emerge from decentralized approaches. The key factors that determine whether loose or tight coupling develops are the capacity of principals and the ability of the central office to respond to principals’ needs.
Figure 1. Examples of district approaches and the coupling outcomes of those approaches.

Findings from the research inform how the relationship between the central office and schools can be intentionally managed to enhance organizational effectiveness and improve student performance. They suggest that there is no one best approach to manage the interactions between principals and the central office. Baltimore’s decentralized network and Montgomery County’s centralized approaches both enabled principals to carry out work in the three functions. At a minimum, the central office-school relationship needs to provide principals connections with the central office in the functions of academic programming, budgeting, and staffing. What mattered most was where the capacity existed to do the work. When principals believed the central office
provided responsive and high-quality service, they tended to follow guidelines in a consistent manner, generating tight coupling. If principals perceived they had greater capacity—skills, knowledge, and experience—in a particular function, then they did the work on their own, whether by central office design or not. These outcomes of tight or loose coupling emerged over time as principals interacted with the central office. In addition, the outcomes appeared to be heavily influenced by both the perceived and real capacity of principals and the central office.

My findings call for close examination of the capacities of principals and the central office, and an assessment of whether those capacities align with the overall approach (e.g. centralization vs. decentralization). Principals have different skills and knowledge. The challenge is matching the capacities of principals and the central office to the particular approaches. For example, if principals in the district have tremendous capacity and skills in budgeting, then the district might consider taking a decentralized approach in this particular function. However, if principals generally do not have much budgeting expertise in the district, then the district might issue greater guidance and control more decisions in that function. My findings also emphasize the importance of sequencing the implementation of reforms. For example, if principals do not have capacity in budgeting, but the district would like to move to a decentralized approach in that function, then principals would clearly need capacity-building (e.g. training) in that area.

**Roadmap of the Dissertation**

In the next chapter, I present the context of my research and summarize the key tenets of loose coupling theory. In doing so, I discuss the historical role of the central
office and review recent research focusing on the interactions between the central office and schools. In Chapter 3, I detail the research design of the study and cover the topics of participants, data collection, and methodology. I also address the validity and reliability of my research. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 cover the main findings of this study. Chapter 4 describes the three key functions and what principals say they needed from their interactions with the central office. Chapter 5 then details how principals in each district had very different relationships with the central office to carry out similar work in the functions. In Chapter 6, I illustrate loose and tight coupling in the functions and describe how these coupling outcomes emerge as principals interact with the central office over time. In Chapter 7, I discuss and interpret these findings, and consider the implications for research, practice, and policy.
Chapter 2: Context and Theoretical Framework

There are over 13,000 public school districts in the United States; each with its own version of a central office. During a typical school day administrators in these central offices interact in countless different ways with principals, assistant principals, teachers, parents, and students. Their goal, often inscribed on district mission or vision statements, typically is to “graduate lifelong learners,” “educate global citizens,” or “prepare every student for success in college, career, and life.” Yet, oftentimes, the central office administrators find themselves working on tasks—filling out and filing reports, interpreting confusing policy directives, and answering emails about bureaucratic procedures—tangentially related to the district’s stated vision. When central office administrators do engage in work that is directly related to student learning, they frequently find themselves trying to mandate changes, many of which schools resist. From the perspective of school leaders, the central office is regularly unresponsive to their needs, and burdens school staff with memos and requests for data. Despite these typical experiences of central office administrators and school leaders, research is clear that the central office can play a critical role in supporting school improvement (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Fullan, 2007; Supovitz, 2006; Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008).

The problem is that there is a breakdown between the intentions of central office activities and how those efforts affect schools. At the crux is the working relationship between the central office and schools, and specifically, the interaction between principals and central office administrators. Unfortunately, scholars have paid little attention to the relationship between the central office and schools (Louis, 2008; Johnson
Research on schools has tended to ignore the role of the central office, while studies of the central office neglect to account for how schools operate.

In this chapter, I first review literature on the role of the central office and its relationship with schools. I focus on a few recent studies that look specifically at the interaction between central office administrators and principals (e.g. Daly & Finnigan, 2010; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Honig et al., 2010). I then discuss the role of the central office from the principals’ perspective and identify decisions in three functions—academic programming, budgeting, and staffing—that are shared and embedded in the central office-school relationship (Johnson, Marietta, Higgins, Mapp, & Grossman, 2015). In the process, I identify new research opportunities for understanding central office-school relationships, which form the foundation of my thesis. I then summarize loose coupling theory (LCT) and describe how it is a particularly promising framework to analyze the interactions between principals and the central office. I begin this chapter with a review of the historical role of the central office and its relationships with schools, capturing the ways in which research has shifted in response to sociopolitical and other contextual factors.

The Central Office and Its Relationship with Schools

Historically, central office administrators have spent over 80 percent of their time on non-instructional issues such as scheduling, facilities, and parent complaints (Hannaway & Sproull, 1978; Crowson & Morris, 1985). Often, conversations about teaching and learning were actively avoided (Darling-Hammond, 1992). Even when districts stated their intent to improve instruction, plans to do so were often vague and lacked a clear strategy (Floden et al., 1988). One of the main reasons why central office
administrators did not focus on instruction was the complexity of the task itself: Because
the core task of schools—teaching—was complicated, dynamic, and often took place in
an uncertain environment that was dispersed across hundreds of classrooms, it was hard
to manage, particularly in large school systems serving diverse local communities
(Cohen, 1988; Labaree, 2004; Shulman, 1987). Thus, central office administrators tended
to withdraw from questions of teaching and learning and focus their energies on
operations (Elmore, 1993). Elmore (1993) summarizes the historical role of the central
office as follows: “[K]ey decisions on curriculum and teaching are passed from states to
districts, from districts to principals, and from principals to teachers, with little effective
focus or guidance” (p. 116).

The onset of the standards and accountability reforms of the 1990s and 2000s,
however, emphasized the role of the central office in teaching and learning. At that time,
increased understanding of the science of instruction and enhancements in measurements
and assessments emerged (Rowan & Miskel, 1999). With greater accountability and
more advanced methods for measuring student performance, central offices could no
longer ignore issues of teaching and learning. For example, the No Child Left Behind
Act of 2001 “placed the district at the forefront” of instruction by holding it accountable
for improving academic performance in schools (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010, p. 739).
However, because the central office had historically neglected instruction it lacked the
capacity to engage effectively in conversations around improving instruction (Anderson,
Louis, Rodway, & Thomas, 2008).

This lag in capacity of central offices to adjust to the new policy environment,
coupled with the rapid growth of charter and other autonomous schools, opened a
vigorous debate about the purpose of the central office (Honig et al., 2010). Some saw central offices as ineffective bureaucracies that made autocratic decisions, essentially preventing principals and teachers in schools from attaining high-performance (Ouchi, 2006, 2009). Others argued that central offices could perform essential functions for schools by providing instructional leadership, managing change, setting policy, and ensuring equity across schools (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Fullan, 2007; Supovitz, 2006; Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008). The debate that emerged regarding the relationship between the central office and schools was framed as a structural dichotomy: to either centralize or decentralize decision-making (Cuban, 1990; Honig et al., 2010). Discussions were often about who has authority—central office administrators or principals and teachers—to make decisions that affect teaching and learning (Hansen & Rosa, 2005; Honig & Rainey, 2011). Arguments for more or less centralization alluded to performance as the deciding factor (Ouchi, 2009; Supovitz, 2006). However, the central office-school interaction was oversimplified to fit one category or the other, resulting in abstract platitudes with limited practical application (Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008).

The centralization-decentralization debate, although critical to the management of large school districts, often obscured the dynamic and complex relationship between the central office and schools where teachers, principals, and central office administrators make many different decisions simultaneously about budgeting, staffing, and curriculum and instruction (Honig et al., 2010; Floden et al., 1988). Schools connect to the central offices in myriad ways. Principals interact with various central office people and departments as they go about their daily work addressing parents’ concerns, managing
facilities, providing trainings, hiring staff, evaluating teachers, and assessing students. At the same time, central office staff members regularly send communications to teachers and school leaders about curricular changes, human resource policies, assessment procedures, and special events. District organizational routines such as principal hiring, school improvement planning, curriculum adoption, and assessment and testing procedures further complicate the interaction between the central office and schools (Spillane, Parise, & Sherer, 2010).

**Role of the central office in improving districts.** One strand of research emerging from the renewed focus on the role of the central office examines school systems that demonstrated improvement in student test scores. Much of this work takes a case study approach to examining districts identified as successful or improving, such as New York City Community School District #2 (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Elmore & Burney, 1998; Elmore & Burney, 2000); Sacramento City Unified School District (Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002); Aldine Independent School District, TX (Togneri & Anderson, 2003); San Diego Unified School District (Hightower, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003); Duval County Public Schools, FL (Supovitz, 2006); Ontario, Canada (Levin, 2008); and Long Beach Unified School District (Zavadasky, 2009). Findings across these studies identified a number of central office practices that appeared to be linked to higher student achievement. These included developing comprehensive district improvement strategies, aligning curricula with rigorous standards, and implementing data-rich accountability systems.

While these studies are promising in their convergence on the idea that the central office is a critical player in the change process, a common critique is that they often treat
the central office as a separate entity without looking at its interaction with school leaders and teachers (Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008). Thus, these studies tend to simplify the relationship between the central office and schools, focusing primarily on the actions of the central office and one outcome—student test scores (Trujillo, 2013). There are few descriptions of how the central office and schools interacted to implement strategies to improve test scores. Moreover, it is unclear what roles school-level leaders, specifically principals, played in shaping those interactions. Findings on the nature of the central office-school relationships are described in broad-brush strokes. For example, a familiar recommendation is for school systems to take a “bottom-up and top-down” approach to managing the relationship between the central office and schools (Fullan, 2007). The bottom-up and top-down approach is characterized as providing a balance of centralization and decentralization that produces a “two-way relationship of pressure, support, and continuous negotiation” (Fullan, 2007, p. 38). Another suggestion gaining popularity is that the central office-school relationship reflects “defined autonomy” (Marzano & Waters, 2009), by which the interactions between schools and the central office or state are shaped by nonnegotiable goals and a system of accountability supported by assessment tools.

The studies’ singular focus on the central office and simplification of central office-school interactions prevents a deeper understanding of the complexities of school systems. The people, teams, committees, and departments working together between schools and the central office are left unspecified. It is unclear what mechanisms might be used to develop central office-school relationships that embody the “bottom-up and top-down” or “defined autonomy” approaches. Further, the studies say little about how
the central office-school relationship resides in, and is affected by, the larger context. In this way, the district-level research often replicated key methodological and conceptual problems found in school effectiveness research. The study designs and data sources do not capture the dynamic interactions between the central office and schools and often lack a theoretical framework for analysis (Trujillo, 2013).

**Recent studies of central office-school relationships.** There are a few notable exceptions of studies that do look specifically at the interactions between the central office and schools and use theoretical frameworks for systematic interpretation of findings (e.g. Daly & Finnigan, 2010; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Honig, 2012). In contrast to many earlier studies on school districts, the findings in these studies emerge from sound conceptual foundations such as system linkages (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010), social capital theory (Daly & Finnigan, 2010), and sociocultural learning theory (Honig, 2012). These studies integrate research methods such as social network analysis, interviews, and document analysis to reveal the complexity of central office-school relationships.

For example, Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) describe in detail how an urban school district implemented literacy reforms across schools. They use Lasky’s (2004) concept of five system linkages—resource, structural, communication, relational, and ideological—to group the substance of interactions between the central office and schools. In terms of resource linkages, the central office allocated materials, trainings, and human capital to schools to support the literacy reform initiative. Structural linkages included district-wide curriculum, pacing guides, benchmark assessments, and a common data-management system. The authors note that principals play a key role in
communication linkages and found that the central office, through emails, phone calls, and monthly meetings, expected principals to “pass on information to their sites and filter it based on their site’s needs” (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010, p. 758). The authors emphasize that future studies should further examine how principals’ skills and experiences shape the central office-school relationship.

Daly and Finnigan (2010) used social network analysis to look at how individual administrators interacted within and between the central office and schools around their knowledge, advice, and innovation of a literacy reform effort. Over time the central office and principals became more connected to each other around knowledge and advice. However, Daly and Finnigan (2010) found that most of the new connections were within subgroups; there was very little interaction across schools and the central office. Knowledge and advice tended to be shared with others based on a “localized neighborhood homophilus approach”—participants preferred to connect with those who worked in the same location (p. 60). Daly and Finnigan (2010) conclude that the disconnected system limits the development of meaningful partnerships between the central office and schools, which are necessary to implement district-wide reform. In doing so, they underscore the need for research that examines the conditions under which some reform efforts are implemented successfully and others are not.

Honig (2012) examined the relationship between area superintendents and principals in three large urban school districts—Atlanta, New York, and Oakland—around instructional leadership. Drawing from 283 interviews and 265 hours of observation, Honig identifies the practices central office administrators used to support the development of principals’ instructional leadership. These included engaging in joint
work, differentiating supports for principals, modeling thinking and actions, providing tools to assess quality instruction, and brokering resources and tensions between the central office and schools. The author concludes that central office administrators engage in forms of teaching as instructional leadership when supporting principals, and through the lens of sociocultural learning theory some practices appear more effective than others.

**Decisions shared by principals and the central office.** There is a robust body of literature about the principal’s role in the school improvement process (e.g. Bryk, et al., 2010; Fullan, 2007; Seashore Louis & Miles, 1990). For example, principals support and increase student learning by developing professional capacity, creating a positive school learning climate, fostering parent, school, community ties, and offering rigorous instructional guidance (Bryk et al., 2010). It is also clear that the principal plays a critical role in leading reforms. As a group of school leadership scholars noted, “To date, we have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership” (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, Anderson et al., 2010, p. 9). However, few studies examine principals’ perspective on the central office and the guidance or direction they feel they need to be successful school leaders.

Research on site-based management and school autonomy suggests that there are five key areas of interaction between the central office and schools (Bimber, 1994; Center for Collaborative Education, 2001). These areas—budgeting, staffing, curriculum and instruction, time and schedules, and governance—are drawn from the Boston Pilot Schools’ concept of essential school autonomies (Doyle & Center for Collaborative Education, 2006). The Public Education Leadership Project (PELP) study built on this work and found three core functions of work embedded in the relationship between the
central office and principals (Johnson, Marietta, Higgins, Mapp, & Grossman, 2015). These three “strategic priorities” were budgeting, staffing, and academic programming. Decisions in these key functions, which were shared by principals and the central office, influenced teaching and learning in classrooms.

Budgeting includes the fiscal resources available to each school, how the amount of those resources is determined, and the percentage of those resources that is managed by the central office compared to the percentage managed at the school site. Staffing involves recruiting, hiring, and firing decisions, as well as the numerical and job-specific composition of the staff. Additionally, staffing includes the policies for transferring teachers from one school to another. Finally, the academic program concerns issues of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Identified Opportunities for Research

Taken together, recent studies of central office-school relationships suggest fruitful directions for future research. First, they point to the critical role that principals play in shaping the interactions between the central office and schools. Extensive research shows how principals can support improved teaching and learning in schools (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Murphy, 1990). However, as Honig (2012) points out, little is known about how the central office can enable that work in a way that responds to a wide range of principals’ capacities. Second, the studies illustrate how the content and characteristics of principals’ interactions with the central office impede or facilitate implementation of district-wide reforms (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Daly & Finnigan, 2010). Third, the studies identify core functions of interaction between the central office
and principals. Studying central-office school interactions around budgeting, staffing, and academic programming could lead to insights on managing change in school districts.

In summary, two promising and interrelated opportunities for research emerge from studies of central office-school relationships. These strands form the foundation of my thesis: 1) How do principals describe their interactions with the central office in large urban school districts?; 2) How do principals describe the degree of control they have over decisions about academic programming, budgeting, and staffing?

Schools interact with central office staff in complex ways and addressing these questions is not straightforward. The challenge for scholars is resisting the urge to oversimplify complex relationships in school districts. As Rorrer and colleagues point out (2008): “So eager to have found the key to unlocking the mysteries of an organization, organizational scholars have documented and frequently essentialized the elements necessary for substantive and core changes to occur. As a result, linear explanations have dominated the discourse, as well as expectations for practice” (p. 335).

There is a theoretical framework—loose coupling theory—that could inform these challenges if applied to the study of central office-school relationships (Weick, 1976; Orton & Weick, 1990). Loose coupling theory is a theoretical framework developed to better understand the complexities of interactions in large organizations—who or what interacts at each level, how they interact, and what factors influence those interactions. The lens it provides can capture the many different ways school leaders connect with the central office and the factors that shape those complex interactions. Loose coupling theory lends itself well to investigating these new directions in district-level research.
The Potential of Loose Coupling Theory

Loose coupling theory (LCT) is a useful framework for studying central office-school relations because it can help identify and analyze the connecting points and interactions between the central office and schools. In its initial formulation, Weick (1976) proposed that in school organizations two “elements” or “events” respond to each other, but in doing so retain their own identity and distinctiveness. A common example would be a district developing a new policy in relation to an instructional reform. While the central office might devise a strategy and communicate the new approach with the intention of increasing consistency across the district, schools would continue using their own approach to learning and teaching in largely the same manner as before the policy change. Weick described this absence of change in schools “loose coupling” and said it helped explain the discrepancy between what practices an educational organization intended to standardize, how it approached achieving this goal, and what actually happened. LCT also served as an analytical tool to make sense of the organizational life of education systems and schools, and has since been applied to organizations more broadly (Orton & Weick, 1990; Bromley & Powell, 2012). The number and types of coupled elements are potentially limitless and encompass interactions not only among individuals, teams, committees, and departments, but also between the external environment, policies, and core technical work (Meyer and Rowan, 1978; Rowan and Miskel, 1999).

More than a decade later, Weick and Orton (1990) proposed a more comprehensive “dialectical” interpretation of LCT. The authors note the popular use of LCT in organizational studies, particularly in education, which they credit to the theory’s
simplicity, relevance, and “cutting-edge mysticism” (Orton & Weick, 1990, p. 203).
However, the same features that contributed to its wide acceptance, also led researchers
to settle for a simplistic interpretation. In reviewing nearly 300 studies, Orton and Weick
found that LCT was most often used as a continuum from loose to tight coupling. They
critiqued this “uni-dimensional” construal because it did not encompass the complexity
of organizational relationships that LCT was originally intended to capture.

Orton and Weick (1990) argue that coupling is a dynamic process where elements
in a system could be decoupled, tightly coupled, or loosely coupled, depending on their
“responsiveness” and “distinctiveness.” According to the authors, responsiveness implies
some form of “connectedness” or reaction between coupled elements. In the case of
central office-school relationships, responsiveness could be considered the interactions
between principals and the central office over time. Distinctiveness means the elements
show evidence of separateness and identity. The main difference between loose and tight
coupling, they argue, is the degree of distinctiveness between elements. In a tightly
coupled system, elements share many of the same characteristics. In a loosely coupled
system the elements retain their distinctiveness or own identity. Elements in a decoupled
system have no connectedness and do not respond to each other.

In the example of a school district, some relationships between the central office
and schools might be regarded as “tight” because there is little distinctiveness across
schools. Other relationships might be “loose” with each school retaining its own identity
(Orton & Weick, 1990; Spillane & Burch, 2003). For example, one central office
curriculum department may require all elementary schools to use the same reading
curriculum in second grade. If schools respond to the request and use the same second
grade reading curriculum, then the relationship between the central office and schools around second grade reading curriculum may be described as “tightly coupled.” That is, the schools are responsive to the central office and there are few differences in the second grade reading curricula that is taught across schools. Assume that same curriculum department allows schools some flexibility in the instructional approaches that teachers use in delivering the second grade reading curriculum. Some schools may respond by giving teachers flexibility in their methods of instruction, while other schools may want all their teachers to use the same approach. Here, schools are responsive to the flexibility granted by the central office, resulting in a high degree of distinctiveness in instructional approaches to second grade reading. In summary, a tightly coupled relationship results in less distinctiveness in the second grade reading curriculum across the system, whereas a loosely coupled relationship leads to greater distinctiveness across schools in the instructional approaches.

It is important to note that the tightly and loosely coupled relationships described in these examples are not static or unchanging. As Orton and Weick emphasize, coupling is a dynamic process that emerges as the elements in a system interact. In this example of curriculum and instruction in second grade reading the loosely and tightly coupled relationships evolve as school staff interact with central office administrators over time. Furthermore, tight and loose coupling are the outcome of those interactions, and may or may not be aligned with the district’s approach. For example, it is plausible that loose coupling could emerge even in the example where the district requires all elementary schools to use the same reading curriculum in second grade. Schools might implement
the curriculum in superficial ways or ignore the mandate altogether, and continue to take their own approach.

**Research on Coupling in Education**

Research on coupling in education has focused almost entirely on how to “tighten” loose coupling at the school level or between state policies and school practice. This type of research is most prevalent in the field of educational leadership where loose coupling is often seen as an “unsatisfactory condition that should be reversed” (Orton & Weick, 1990, p. 211). The research takes a normative approach by which principals must find ways to bring greater consistency—tighter coupling—across instructional approaches used by teachers in classrooms. For example, in a survey of principals and teachers in 111 public schools, Firestone (1985) looked at the potential of five strategies to counteract loose coupling at the school level. These included direct informal communication, direct supervision, standardization of work processes, standardization of outputs, and standardization of skills, knowledge, and values. Firestone concluded that professional development and informal socialization appeared to have the most potential to tighten coupling within schools. Orton and Weick (1990) later summarized three categories of strategies used to tighten the coupling between policy and practice in education: enhanced leadership, focused attention through resource allocation, and shared values.

More recently, scholars have explored coupling as a process and its effect on classroom instruction (e.g. Coburn, 2004; Spillane, Parise, & Sherer, 2010; Hallet, 2010). In a study of reading instruction in California from 1983 through 1999, Coburn (2004) looked at the impact of shifts in state-level institutional conceptions of effective reading
instruction on teacher practice. Focusing on the experiences of three elementary school teachers who entered teaching during different reading policy environments, Coburn illustrates how the instructional approaches taken by the teachers were connected with their background and the broader institutional environment. State and federal policies, media, research, and university training shaped the ways teachers thought about and taught reading.

Spillane and colleagues (2010) examined how school principals in four public elementary schools responded to a changing institutional environment that emphasized test-based accountability. They found that the principals relied on organizational routines, such as periodic assessments, grade-level and subject committee meetings, and data-monitoring meetings, to reduce distinctiveness—tightly couple—instruction across classrooms. These new organizational routines transformed the formal structure of the school, thus embedding the demands of the institutional environment into the organizational structure of schools. In an ethnographic study of a school undergoing accountability reforms, Hallet (2010) vividly illustrates the coupling between policy and classroom dynamics as a dynamic and ongoing process. Over the course of the study the elements of policy and instruction recoupled in a process the teachers at the school called “turmoil” (Hallet, 2010, p. 53).

Together, these studies show how coupling is a process influenced by the institutional environment. They also suggest that looking at the coupling process at the intersection of the central office and schools could lead to insights about why some practices are consistent across a school system and others are not. Understanding how loose and tight coupling happen in the central office-school relationship is essential to
implementing reforms and managing school districts in ways that improve organizational effectiveness and lead to greater student learning. If district leaders intend on creating greater consistency across schools in a particular function, they must understand the conditions under which a particular approach—centralization or decentralization—will produce that outcome. That is, if we do not know how practices become more standardized or varied in districts, then reforms intended to improve student outcomes across schools are left to chance.

**Applying LCT to Central Office-school Relationships**

The promise of LCT in examining the organizational behavior of school systems is that it can reveal why some approaches to managing the central office-school relationship work as intended as others do not. It does this by distinguishing between the approach a district takes in managing schools (e.g. centralize or decentralize decisions) and the actual outcome of that approach (i.e. loose or tight coupling). In the case of school districts, the approach or plan may involve trying to change who has authority—the central office or schools—to make decisions in a particular function. The approaches used to manage the central office-school relationship typically follow a continuum that ranges from centralization to decentralization. Centralization implies moving decisions from the school-level to the central office with the goal of increasing consistency and standardization across schools. Decentralization means giving schools and principals more decisions-making authority to encourage differentiation and flexibility. For example, a district may give principals more control over their budgets because it believes their schools have different needs and must have the flexibility to spend funds to meet those varied needs. In this case, the district might be described as decentralizing
budget decisions to principals. LCT encourages us to examine how the interactions between principals and the central office are influenced by the capacities of each, and whether decentralization results in schools differentiating how they spend money. One might expect over time that the outcome of the approach would be loose coupling—there would be distinctiveness across schools in how funds are spent. But, if the result were tight coupling instead, the lens of LCT would require examining the interactions between schools and the central office around budgeting. In this way, LCT may allow us to see when and under what conditions the central office might promote standardization and tight coupling through centralization or differentiation and loose coupling through decentralization. Identifying patterns of effective uses of tight and loose coupling could then guide approaches to improving teaching and learning, particularly if the connections and relationships between the central offices and schools in large urban districts were better understood.

In summary, LCT has the potential to provide more subtle and intricate understandings of the relationship between the central office and schools in three important ways. First, LCT focuses on how elements or components are connected within organizations. Using LCT encourages researchers to define who or what is coupled between the central office and schools. Second, LCT provides a framework for examining the interactions between the central office and schools. As Orton and Weick emphasize, tight and loose coupling emerge through dynamic and ongoing interactions. In this way, LCT facilitates exploring the human dimensions of organizational structures by treating them as “something organizations do, rather than merely as something they have” (Orton & Weick, 1990, p. 218). Third, LCT distinguishes between the intention of
a particular approach (centralization and decentralization) and its outcome (loose or tight coupling). In this way, LCT may provide insight into how different structures used to implement a particular approach—regional or area superintendents, professional learning communities, school networks, instructional rounds, or face-to-face meetings—result in tight or loose coupling across schools. Understanding the link between intention and outcome is essential for managing schools for specific outcomes.
Chapter 3: Research Design

To address my research questions, I used a qualitative inquiry strategy that incorporated interviews and document review into a comparative case study design (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2013). I then examined the central office-school relationships in Baltimore and Montgomery County through the lens of loose coupling theory (LCT). Comparative case study is a well-suited methodology to explore dynamic and complex phenomena (Eisenhardt, 1989). It offers a mix of depth and breadth essential to the comprehensive analysis of central office-school relationships and can be used to ground theoretical frameworks in various types of evidence, such as qualitative interviews, internal documents, and media reports.

In this chapter, I first describe why I selected Baltimore and Montgomery County as the focus sites for my study. I then provide an overview of the interview participant characteristics and the data collection process. In the third main section, I discuss how I analyzed the data to answer my two main research questions. Finally, I address concerns about the validity and reliability of the study.

Site Selection

I chose to analyze data collected from Baltimore City Schools and Montgomery County Public Schools in the larger PELP study sample of five districts based on my research questions, methodology, and theoretical framework. My two research questions focus on the perceptions of principals as they interact with the central office:

1) How do principals describe their interactions with the central office in two large urban school districts, in relation to the budgeting, staffing, and academic programming?
2) How do principals describe the degree of control they have over decisions about academic programming, budgeting, and staffing?

Focusing on those interactions in only one district would constrain analysis and inhibit the insights that often emerge from comparing patterns of findings across contexts. The advantages of applying the framework of LCT can only be derived by comparing and contrasting at least two theoretically-relevant cases. So, I wanted to ensure there was variation in the patterns of coupling when comparing districts in order to access the analytical and explanatory power of LCT. As Orton and Weick (1990) emphasize, research methodology should adapt to the dialectical interpretation of LCT, not vice-versa: “To preserve the dialectical interpretation of loose coupling, researchers must continue to transform methodology to serve theory, rather than transforming theory to serve methodology” (p. 218). Therefore, I selected the two districts in the PELP sample that had clearly dissimilar approaches to managing schools.

For example, at the time of the study Baltimore had devolved nearly all decision-making to its principals in the midst of districtwide turnaround after experiencing decades of declining enrollment, dysfunctional governance, leadership turnover, and poor performance (Grossman, Johnson, & Brookover, 2011). From 2007-2013, CEO Andrés Alonso shifted control and resources away from the central office and toward the schools, eventually granting principals near full autonomy over decisions in budgeting, staffing, and academic programming. In contrast, principals in Montgomery County had far less freedom from the central office, particularly in budgeting and academic programming (Childress, Doyle, & Thomas, 2009).
Given the complexity and the contextualized nature of each district’s experiences, it was also important that there were similarities between the two districts. Otherwise it would be difficult to identify whether patterns in the data stemmed from the central school-relationship or some other variable, such as size or state context. Both districts had over 80,000 students, served a diverse student population that was over 50 percent minority, enrolled large concentrations of low-income students, and had received national recognition for their instructional improvement efforts (see Appendix A for site characteristics). It is important to note that Montgomery County—in contrast to Baltimore—also served a large number of white students from relatively wealthy backgrounds. Thus, both districts were large, urban districts that were likely to contain effective practices worthy of examination and juxtaposition. Moreover, the districts were geographically linked and were within the Maryland State Department of Education. These similarities allow for a more focused exploration of how the role of central offices converge and diverge in two sites by minimizing extraneous variables.

In summary, the two districts are similar in many ways, yet varied in their approaches to managing the central office-school relationship. Montgomery County appeared to be deliberately centralized, whereas Baltimore was purposely decentralized. Given the differences in the way principals might experience the role of the central office, I could use comparative case analysis to generate hypotheses about what might be productive approaches for specific districts as well as practices that might be useful across settings.
Participants

Participants in the study included school and district leaders, split about evenly between Baltimore and Montgomery County. In all, 32 individuals were recruited and interviewed from the two districts. Of these, 17 were from Montgomery County, including the superintendent, deputy superintendent, seven other central office leaders, and eight principals. The 15 participants from Baltimore included the superintendent, chief academic officer, five other central office leaders, and eight principals. In both districts, principals represented a variety of school levels and student performance. For example, Montgomery County principals included three elementary school principals, two intermediate school principals, and two high school principals. The elementary school principals were from both high-performing (ranked 1 of 774) and low-performing (rank 664 of 774) schools in the state (see Appendix B for characteristics of sample).

Data Collection

The PELP study data were gathered through document collections and interviews conducted during site visits to Baltimore and Montgomery County in the spring of 2012. I participated in all aspects of the data collection process. In advance of these visits, I worked with PELP faculty members and research assistants to conduct background research, develop interview protocol, and then compile a list of potential interviewees. In recruiting participants, we worked with a district liaison in the central office and asked to interview the superintendent, deputy superintendent, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, two to four regional superintendents, and six to eight principals. We left it to the discretion of the liaison to select the area superintendents for the interviews. For the school principal participants, we specifically requested different
levels of schools and a mix of higher-performing and struggling schools. We recognized
the weaknesses in allowing someone from the central office to select interview
participants for school principals. The district might be inclined to select higher-
performing principals with positive biases towards the district leadership and principals
may have felt coerced to participate in the interviews. We attempted to mitigate these
weaknesses in two ways. First, we checked the demographics and student test
performance of the schools led by the principals in the sample. We found that the
schools reflected a wide range of academic achievement, which gave us confidence that
the district had met our request for a mix of high- and low-achieving schools. Secondly,
prior to conducting the interviews we confirmed with principals that they were
participating voluntarily and informed them that they could withdraw from the study at
any point. We also promised the principals that we would not discuss their responses
with anyone else in the district and they would remain anonymous in the study.

The interview protocols for principals and central office administrators used in the
PELP study elicited responses that address my research questions (see Appendix C and D
for protocols). For example, question 4 in the principal protocols (“How would you
describe your relationship with the central office?”) directly addresses my first research
question about how principals describe their general interactions with the central office.
My second research question about how much control principals say they have over
decisions shared with the central office is addressed specifically in questions 7, 8, and 9
in the protocol. For example, question 7 asks, “How much control do you have over your
school’s budget? What can you control?” Questions on the protocol for central office
administrators generated responses that reinforced or contradicted principal’s
perceptions, offering a nuanced view of the central office-school relationship in each district. For example, questions 5, 6, and 7 for central office leaders ask generally about the relationship between the central office and schools, and how much autonomy principals had in budgeting, staffing, and academic programming.

The interview data were supplemented by 1200 pages of relevant documents from the two districts including school improvement plans, media reports, internal research reports, memos, and presentations. These documents also included several case studies written by PELP faculty on past reform efforts in Baltimore and Montgomery County. The documents offer additional details and illustrations to complement the interview data (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013). A list of the documents for each district is included in Appendix E.

**Analysis**

I analyzed the interviews and documents as two exploratory case studies of the relationships between principals and the central office in Baltimore and Montgomery County. I then conducted a series of cross-case comparisons to generate themes, similarities, and differences across the two districts (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2013). To code the data, I used a three-stage process of thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). This approach allowed me to code the qualitative interview data using broad themes and then use them to narrow in more specifically on the answers to my research questions. The first stage involved developing interview protocol, recruiting participants, conducting interviews, and collecting document data. I taped, transcribed, and loaded the interviews into the qualitative analytical software program Atlas TI to further aide my analysis.
In the second phase, I used thematic analysis as an entry point into the large amount of data collected (Boyatzis, 1998). In this phase, I used an open coding process looking for emergent themes or patterns from data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Next, I combined these emic codes with a set of etic codes generated from literature. For example, I coded the data using the features of LCT (Orton & Weick, 1990). These codes included distinctiveness, loose coupling, and tight coupling. I also coded the data with features of the functions of academic programming, budgeting, and staffing (see Appendix F for set of final codes). I then wrote memos about the resulting emic and etic codes, identifying patterns or commonalities. Codes that appeared to represent similar themes or phenomena were grouped together into larger categories. I then applied these larger codes to the data using Atlas TI.

I took a similar approach in analyzing the document data. In some cases, these documents offered additional details and illustrations not found in interview data. Other times, the documents supported, confirmed, or contradicted the interview data. After coding the interview data and constructing initial cases of the central office-school relationships in the two districts, I analyzed the document data with the same coding approach used for the interview data. I queried the coded document data and compared it to the coded interview data. I then integrated the analyzed document data into the emergent case studies, paying particular attention to where the interview and document data diverged and converged.

In the third stage of my analytical approach, I queried all the coded quotes by district, looked across the quotes in each code, and wrote memos about common themes emerging from the data. I then used these themes to construct cases of how principals in
each district perceived their relationship with the central office. Next, I applied the theoretical framework of LCT to contrast these case studies in an iterative process to answer my research questions.

**RQ1: Principals interactions with the central office.** My goal in answering this research question was to better understand the many types of interactions between principals and the central office. In comparing the case studies of Baltimore and Montgomery County, I sought to learn where and how key decisions about academic programming, budgeting, and staffing were made. I tried to identify how local approaches to central-school management differed across schools serving diverse communities. I paid particular attention to whether or not participants offered consistent assessments of their district’s practices, and I looked for tensions that emerged at different places in the district’s organization, given their management strategy, systems, and structures.

**RQ2: Principals control of decisions.** To answer my second main research question, I analyzed the case studies on the central office-school relationships in Baltimore and Montgomery County to first understand what decisions principals controlled. In the analysis, I focused on the key school improvement work in academic programming, budgeting, and staffing, but remained open to other decisions expressed by principals. Next, I applied LCT to examine whether those descriptions fit criteria for a loosely coupled or tightly coupled relationship with the central office. As I discovered, sometimes the coupling that emerged aligned with the district’s intentions. For example, in both districts a decentralized teacher hiring approach produced a loosely coupled relationship between principals and the central office. Other times, however, there
appeared to be misalignment. For example, in some cases a decentralized approach led to tighter coupling.

Validity and Reliability

Yin (2013) proposes that effective case study research must meet four design tests: construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability. According to Yin (2013), construct validity—selecting the right measures for concepts being studied—is particularly problematic in case study research. I mitigated these concerns by drawing on multiple sources of data. This encouraged convergent lines of inquiry that informed the concepts chosen for study. Internal validity is a test most appropriate for research making causal claims, not for descriptive or exploratory case studies like the one proposed here. That said, I included some internal validity checks during my analysis, such as addressing rival explanations for my findings and matching patterns with other published research. External validity concerns the generalizability of the findings. Although specific findings about how the central office-school relationship behaved in each district will not be generalizable, theoretical insights emerging from the study may be. For example, I found that my study led to some informative findings about where it is appropriate to apply LCT in district-level research, and where it is not. Therefore, I addressed the external validity of my study by rigorously applying LCT as a theoretical framework to analyze the data. Finally, to increase the reliability of my findings, I documented all the procedures used to collect the data and carry out the analysis.
Chapter 4: Key Functions in Central Office-School Relationships

Before describing how principals’ interactions with the central office differed across the districts, it is important to first understand the shared decisions between schools and the central office in Baltimore and Montgomery County. Prior research conducted by Harvard University’s Public Education Leadership Project (PELP) showed that there are three essential sets of shared decisions between central office administrators and principals (Johnson, Marietta, Higgins, Mapp, & Grossman, 2015). The decisions cover three critical functions—budgeting, staffing, and academic programming—of the work in school districts. They are also considered the most obvious and important levers for reform and thought to have the greatest effect on the instructional core (Johnson, Marietta, Higgins, Mapp, & Grossman, 2015). By examining interactions in these functions, we can understand how principals in Baltimore and Montgomery County view their responsibilities and sense of obligation toward the central office. This in turn gives insights into how two very different approaches to managing the central office-school relationship still address the basic functions of work carried out in school districts.

In this chapter, I first provide a basic overview of the central office-school approaches in Baltimore and Montgomery County. I then describe how principals perceived their interactions with the central office in the three functions. Finally, I identify what principals believed were essential features of their interactions with the central office. For example, principals stated that it was important that their interactions with the central office enabled them to exercise local leadership within their schools, which they felt was essential to improving student achievement. In addition, principals described how their interactions with the central office had to be flexible enough to
respond to the variation in local communities and leadership capacity across schools. Finally, principals suggested that they wanted accountability balanced with support (e.g. guidance, resources, coaching)

**Three Shared and Essential Functions**

Principals in Baltimore and Montgomery County interacted with their central offices in different ways to carry out their work in the three functions. In Baltimore, the central office-school relationship consisted of three components—network support teams led by facilitators, executive directors, and leadership academies. The network support team included individuals who represented key central office functions, such as budgeting, curriculum, and staffing. Executive directors were responsible for evaluating and developing principals. The leadership academies were monthly meetings for principals and their leadership team focused on professional development in matters of the academic program. Principals in Montgomery County interacted with a mix of staff in central office departments and in joint district-union committees. They worked with assigned central office staff in departments covering human resources, curriculum, and budgeting. They also interacted with joint district-union committees to resolve staffing and curriculum issues. An assigned community superintendent evaluated principals in Montgomery County.

In Table 1, I summarize principals’ interactions with the central office about the three functions in Baltimore and Montgomery County. The following sections then describe in detail the nature of these interactions in academic programming, budgeting, and staffing.
Table 1

Principals’ Interactions with the Central Office about the Three Functions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functions</th>
<th>Baltimore</th>
<th>Montgomery County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Programming</td>
<td>Curriculum specialists in network, leadership academies, facilitator, and executive director</td>
<td>Central office liaisons in Office of Curriculum and Instructional Programs, Office of Technology, Office of Technology, Office of Human Resources, and Office of School Performance, Community superintendent. Joint district-union advisory committees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budgeting</td>
<td>Network budgeting analyst and facilitator</td>
<td>Joint district-union budgeting committee and central office liaison in Title I office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staffing</td>
<td>Sometimes network staffing specialist</td>
<td>Central office liaison in human resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td></td>
<td>Central office liaison in human resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring</td>
<td>Network staffing specialist, facilitator, and sometimes executive director</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Network staffing specialist, facilitator, and executive director.</td>
<td>PAR process members and staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Budgeting**

Baltimore principals routinely conferred with their network budgeting analyst and facilitator to help make budgeting decisions and track their expenses. Because principals controlled most of their funds, they were also responsible for tracking their school budgets. A majority of the budget was spent on staffing positions and accounted for at the beginning of the year. But, principals still had a considerable amount of money—$200,000 for an average-sized elementary school—to spend over the course of the year. Principals had to manage those funds according to state and federal regulations, and
district policies. To do so, principals relied on their network staff and some online tools they had helped put together.

For example, a veteran elementary-middle school principal in Baltimore explained how support from the budgeting analyst in the network helped her be creative in spending money to meet the needs of her students. “We have some really great systems they’ve [network budgeting analysts] created that will actually allow you to track your budget and you can always call on support from budget analysts that we have within the network.” The principal at the admissions-based high school emphasized that the budgeting specialists played a particularly important role in situations involving complicated rules and procedures, such as procurement and reimbursement: “What’s helped is that I don't feel that I'm in an adversarial relation with somebody in procurement to try to pay for a bill. There’s a network budgeting liaison who says, ‘No, no, no. Let me explain to you how this works.’ I can deal with my school and not have to feel like I'm in battle with somebody at central office.”

In Montgomery County most principals controlled only small amounts of their budget—really only enough for supplies and materials—but they still described the importance of the function of budgeting in their interactions with the central office. For example, all principals interviewed mentioned the budgeting process as an important feature of their relationship with the central office. The district budget was developed in a centralized and collaborative process with the leaders from three employees’ unions and was used as the basis for a comprehensive set of staffing allocation guidelines. In the process of developing the budget, principals provided input on the budget and guidelines through the executive director and president of their administrative union, the
Montgomery County Association of Administrators and Principals (MCAAP). The MCAAP executive director and president also both sat on the senior district leadership team and a 10-member budgeting committee. For example, if principals felt that the guideline for allocating media specialist positions should be revised to provide more support in this area they would communicate that to their union leaders. A principal explained:

The budgeting process is a pretty inclusive process. You have your school folks represented through each of the unions, the presidents and the executive director of each. They go back and get input, and so it’s like they’ll meet with principals and ask, ‘What guidelines aren’t working, are working?’ and then they’ll go [back to the budgeting committee].

Through that process, most principals interviewed felt the budget reflected their needs because the MCAAP president and executive director sought their input and brought their feedback to the budgeting committee.

Principals of designated Title I schools in Montgomery County had a slightly different relationship with the central office in the function of budgeting. The district gave these principals—numbering 25 schools—flexibility in how to spend a portion of the Title I funds allocated to students who qualified for a free or reduced priced lunch. The amount of money was substantial. For example, one elementary school with an enrollment of 730, 88% of whom qualified for a free or reduced priced lunch, received an additional $800,000 in Title I funds. The principal of that school had flexibility to spend the money on what he needed as long as he stayed within the policies set forth by the federal program. For support in carrying out work in budgeting, this principal had a
direct contact with a liaison in the Title I office. That staff member provided him with spreadsheet tools and advice on how to spend the money. As the principal noted, “We get our budget sheet [budgeting tool] from Title I. It’s just to be process-oriented, help people see the decisions that have been made, and have it be about students, which has been great.”

**Staffing**

In Baltimore, principals went to their staffing specialist in the network for guidance and authorization on decisions in recruitment and hiring. When a position opened, principals could work with their staffing specialist to find eligible candidates. For their part, the staffing specialist had a list excessed teachers from within the district and contacts from job fairs who might be good candidates. If the vacancy involved a position for which there were eligible candidates on the excessed teacher list, then the staffing specialist played a more involved role in filling the vacancy. In some cases, the principal and specialist may negotiate over whether to place an excessed teacher in the school.

When the vacancy did not involve an excessed candidate, principals received a list of candidates staffing specialists had recruited from centrally-organized job fairs. However, none of the principals interviewed said they relied on the staffing specialists for recruitment. Many stated they used their own contacts and methods to recruit, bypassing support from the staffing specialist. For example, several principals said they had contacts at local colleges that they used to advertise open positions and recruit candidates. Consequently, Baltimore principals mostly relied on their central office support network for guidance in the hiring and allocation of positions in their schools, but not for
recruitment. As noted, principals in Baltimore received most of their school budget as dollars, and were then expected to spend that money on positions in their schools. The teachers’ contract stipulated some guidelines for how that money could be spent, for example, staffing ratios based on class size maximums for grade levels. Principals also had to meet the needs of special populations of students, such as those with disabilities or learning the English language. Funding positions that addressed all these varying needs and requirements was complicated and principals often turned to their staffing specialist and budgeting analyst for help.

Montgomery County principals relied on a mix of central office staff and joint district-union committees for support in staffing. The Office of Human Resources had a well-developed process designed to match district culture with the values and beliefs of teaching candidates. The district received an average 15 applications for each opening. For elementary positions the ratio was much higher at about 26:1. Applications were screened for basic criteria such as adequate grades, appropriate certification, and references. Then using supplemental application materials such as a written response prompt and questionnaire, human resources staff members assessed applicants for fit and assigned them a ranking score of “highly recommend,” “recommend,” or “do not recommend.”

When principals had an open position, they worked with their assigned liaison in Human Resources to generate a list of candidates from the centralized recruitment pool whom they could interview. One principal described a typical interaction with the liaison when he needed to identify candidates for open positions: “We get monthly updates from our staffer about where our openings are and those kinds of things, and then I work
closely with them to put together an interview pool.” Another principal talked about how his relationship with the staffing specialist was integral to his strategy for hiring teachers: “I post the position. They apply. They’re then ranked by Human Resources. I think she’s [staffer in central office] terrific. She will let me know if a person would not be a good match for my school. She’ll give me the heads-up.” Once they had the list of candidates, principals typically did not connect back to Human Resources until they were ready to hire a candidate. Principals carried out the entire interviewing and selection process within their schools, and with little influence from the central office.

For teacher evaluation, principals worked through the joint district-union peer-assistance-and-review (PAR) process. Teachers in the PAR program (novice and struggling veteran teachers) were assigned a consulting teacher who provided support by helping plan and model lessons, providing resources, team-teaching, conducting observations, and evaluating. The principal also conducted her own evaluation of the teacher, and checked in regularly with the PAR panel on the teacher’s progress. At the end of the year, if the consulting teacher and principal believed the teacher was still not meeting the standard, then the teacher was given the choice to resign or appeal to the PAR panel. Most teachers chose to appeal the decision and the PAR panel then reviewed the consulting teacher’s and principal’s recommendations and decided whether to non-renew for non-tenured teachers, dismiss for tenured teachers, or let the teacher continue teaching with or without a second year of PAR support. In general, the PAR program has strong support from principals. As one principal commented, “It’s a remarkable process. This is so much better than anything else I’ve ever experienced in terms of being able to improve instruction. It’s compassionate. It’s not a gotcha.”
Academic Programming

In Baltimore, principals relied on network curriculum directors and the monthly leadership academy for support in the instructional program in their schools. In each network, there were four to six curriculum directors covering major subjects, such as literacy, math, science, social studies, and languages. Principals’ interactions with the directors centered on “guidance documents” that the Chief Academic Officer and her leadership team had developed to provide recommendations to principals on curricular programs. The guidance documents included lists of fundamental components that should be a part of particular programs or courses.

Additionally, monthly leadership academies supported principals in the academic program. Nearly all Baltimore principals interviewed described how the leadership academies had been instrumental in supporting school-level implementation of the Common Core State Standards. As one principal said:

So when we go to this training, we are constantly looking at classroom practice, teacher instruction, and assessing what's working, what's not working. And you know, my colleagues will say that they're getting tired of it, but I think it's perfect because it's like what we should be drilled in.

An elementary-middle school principal concurred, “Each month we do a professional learning. We’re able to have conversations about what we see as evidence for effectiveness. And it’s good, because it gives feedback to the principal and we get insight into how to evaluate our schools.” Principals also appreciated that the leadership academy deepened relationships within their networks. One principal felt that it
contributed to developing the support network as a learning community: “It’s a small group. So we feel more like a community together.”

In Montgomery County, principals’ interactions with the central office in the function of academic programming mirrored those in budgeting. Although, most interactions occurred in a transactional nature with the Office of Curriculum and Instructional Practices, principals did play an advisory role to the central office in the area of curriculum through a joint district-union committee. The Office of Curriculum and Instructional Practices (OCIP) led the development, training, and implementation of all the district’s curricula. And similar to budgeting, principals advised the OCIP through a special Curriculum Advisory Committee that was partially organized through MCAAP. The main points of interaction between principals and the central office were around OCIP’s comprehensive curricula guides, which were hundreds of pages long and detailed the curriculum in every grade and subject, including day-to-day lesson plans.

Principals felt these guides were high quality and provided ample support for the schools and teachers in the function of academic programming. An elementary school principal commented, “This school system has a really good infrastructure about writing good curriculum. The curriculum is much more rigorous than some of the state standards, and they really go above and beyond.” A middle school principal had similar comments about the support of the comprehensive guides. She felt the guides included the specific instructional techniques that pushed rigor in the classroom. “Our curriculum is well-written. If you’re teaching the curriculum, your kids are going to improve. And we see it. The curriculum has been thoroughly developed.” Another principal at a high school with an International Baccalaureate (IB) program concurred, “I get a lot of
support. With the IB program, of course there’s a central office staff person with IB [experience], and they helped us with the process.”

But, most of principals’ day-to-day interactions with OCIP around the curriculum guides occurred via memos or emails, which often travelled only one way—from OCIP to schools. Principals’ key point of influence was through the Curriculum Advisory Committee. Composed of 9 principals selected through a MCAAP-led process, the Curriculum Advisory Committee reported directly to the district’s Director of Curriculum. The group met with the Director on a monthly basis to raise challenges and suggest changes to the curriculum guides. As one elementary school principal on the Curriculum Advisory Committee explained: “Our client is the Director of Curriculum and we bring issues forward regarding curriculum. It’s really to get the principal’s feedback. I do think he [Director of Curriculum] listens. I really do.”

It is important to note that OCIP was in the midst of overhauling the district’s curricula to incorporate Common Core State Standards and integrate them into an online platform. So, there were some additional opportunities for principals to interact with OCIP in the form of training and feedback on the curricula overhaul, which was dubbed Curriculum 2.0. One principal who had seen early versions of components of Curriculum 2.0 was impressed: “I’m blown away by how incredible it is, and also how a teacher can enhance it, how a teacher can differentiate it, so it’s not just a curriculum anymore, it’s really how to use it. I can’t wait ‘till it’s moved on up [implemented].”

**What Principals Need in their Relationship with the Central Office**

Across the two districts, principals expressed the need for several common features of their relationship with the central office. Principals described how it was not
enough to simply interact with the central office to carry out the work in the three functions. They preferred those interactions to take place in a certain way. In examining these preferences, I found three common qualities.

First, across both districts, principals said their interaction with the central office had to enable local-level leadership with teachers and communities. Principals described how their interactions with the central office needed to give them the flexibility to connect with local communities, manage time for collaboration, and use data provided by the central office. Second, in both districts principals said they needed the interactions to be flexible enough to meet diverse school demographics. In Baltimore, there was flexibility in the budgeting allocation and the support networks were organized in a way that paired central office expertise with school needs. Principals’ interactions with the central office in Montgomery County about budgeting also had similar features that differentiated by school need. Finally, principals in Baltimore and Montgomery County said they needed their interactions with the central office to balance aspects of support, such as guidance and additional resources, with accountability.

Empowering local-level leadership. In both Baltimore and Montgomery County, many principals said their relationship with the central office was productive because it enabled them to carry out their jobs in ways that generated trust with the local communities. Principals described how their work depended on cultivating deep and personal relationships with their schools’ teachers, students, parents, and community members. They discussed how their relationship with the central office needed to support them in carrying out that local-level leadership. For example, a principal of a high-poverty and majority black elementary school in Baltimore commented that her
interactions with the central office allowed her to meet the needs of her local school community. As she noted, “My relationship with central allows me to do the one thing I need to do in my job, which is be that positive force, bringing that motivation, bringing that energy, bringing that drive and helping teachers and parents and students and community members to move forward with it.” A middle school principal at a high performing, relatively wealthy, middle school in Montgomery County similarly described how his relationship with the central office needed to support community-level leadership. He emphasized that principals can only be successful if they “communicate with the community” and “not be afraid to get out there in front of tough issues.” To do so, interactions with the central office had to be supportive of letting principals serve as leaders of their communities.

Principals also felt that it was essential that their relationship with the central office allow them to schedule time for teachers to collaborate and work in teams in their schools. They wanted a relationship with the central office that provided flexibility in school-level scheduling, and did not mandate specifically how time should be spent during the day. An elementary school principal in Montgomery County believed that scheduling flexibility was one big reason why her school had been successful. Because the central office gave her some control over the school schedule, she was able to incorporate time for collaboration among teachers across grades and subjects. “We’re more interdisciplinary in our approach with our teachers,” said the principal, “and that has come out of building a schedule that’s reflective and collaborative in that way.” Another principal in Montgomery County concurred: “So what’s the number one thing everybody complains about? It’s time. So we try to alleviate a lot of that by creating a
schedule that’s collaborative. Similar refrains were heard from principals in Baltimore. As one principal in Baltimore said, “I just love the flexibility in scheduling. It gives me and teachers a chance to find time to collaborate, to work together.”

Finally, principals in both Baltimore and Montgomery County saw using data effectively as an essential skill to being successful. This required both having access to the right data and having the ability to effectively interpret and plan to act using that data. A principal in Montgomery County reflected on this point, “As principal, I still gather data and do data. I think it’s important that I’m able to do all that. The main thing is to create a situation where you’re monitoring what’s happening [to] see if it’s making a difference in student achievement.” Another principal in Montgomery County remarked, “Data is huge, huge, huge. Every meeting you’re asked to bring student data to the table and we will go right down to the student level and say, ‘What are you doing for this child?’” Baltimore principals agreed with their peers in Montgomery County. One elementary school principal explained, “We are really looking at the data more. All of us are deeply engaged in using, becoming data driven.” A principal at an elementary-middle school attributed improvement in achievement to the effective use of data: “We collect our formative assessment data and our formal assessment data. We are able to quickly analyze that data and make some decisions or tweak our strategies or initiatives.”

**Flexibility to serve diverse school needs.** Principals in both districts also said that their interactions with the central office needed to be flexible enough to respond to varying school needs arising from differences in performance, demographics, and leadership capacity. Principals said that their relationship with the central office required flexible approaches to autonomy and support. In Baltimore, the support networks were
designed to be flexible enough to serve the needs of different types of schools and diverse communities. First, similar schools were organized into the same networks. For example, Baltimore had charter schools, dual governance “Transformation” schools, and traditional schools. All the charter schools were assigned to the same network and the executive director in that network was a former charter school principal. So the personnel in the network were differentiated in order to understand and meet the unique needs of the charter schools in the district. As one charter school principal said about his network,

The networks for me really come into play when I’ve got an issue where it’s novel to me, I’ve never experienced this before and I have somebody who I know it’s their job to figure this out somehow. So I can e-mail either my facilitator or executive director and say, “What do I do when the police are pounding on a door next door and I haven’t been told anything about it?”

There was a similar type of relationship between the networks and the dual-governance Transformation schools. Transformation Schools were technically run by external charter operators, but the principal and teachers were still under the jurisdiction of the school district. Principals in Transformation Schools had two supervisors, one at the operating agency and another with the executive director in the district. Again, the executive director overseeing Transformation Schools had experience in charter schools. She had to continually coordinate communication between the operator and district to make sure Transformation School principals received a coherent message. That delicate balance was best illustrated in the example of principal evaluation. According to the contractual agreement with the administrative union in Baltimore, principals were
evaluated through the district’s process. Since principals in Transformation schools were technically employed by the district, they had to be evaluated within the district’s evaluation system. But, there was an informal agreement that the evaluation be done in coordination with the operators of Transformation Schools. As the executive director of the Transformation Schools explained, “My work with the operator was to just insure that I was in coordination with them on how they viewed the work of the principal and how we even went about evaluating the principal, because they had a tool they had been using.”

From the perspective of the principal of a Transformation school, the network and executive director structure didn’t impede leadership, even if it meant being evaluated by two different parties and attending two different principals’ meetings. As that principal said, “I’m evaluated by both. So [the operator] has an evaluation tool for principals and Baltimore City has an evaluation tool.” But, according to the principal, the district and operator collaborated so she did not receive separate evaluations: “They collaborate together with me present and we go over the data and we talk about key points and next steps. So I get one evaluation with both the partner and the district together.”

In Montgomery County, the central office-school relationship was managed in a way that met the diverse needs of schools by differentiating resources by level of need. Using a formula that took into account poverty, race, language status, and disability, schools with highest needs were designated “educationally impacted.” With this designation, the schools received extra teacher positions based on staffing formulas that had lower class sizes. The educationally impacted schools also received the lion’s share of Title I funds, since these were concentrated in the schools with the greatest needs.
That meant that principals in Montgomery County at schools serving students with the highest poverty levels had more resources at their disposal.

**Balancing accountability and support.** Principals also spoke of their interactions with the central office as needing to balance accountability with support. Accountability refers to how principals were evaluated for their performance. Support could include guidance, coaching, resources, and technical assistance. In Baltimore and Montgomery County, principals described tensions between accountability and support in their relationship with the central office. In most cases, however, the functions of budgeting, staffing, and academic programming concerned elements of support. Indeed, there was little overlap between the elements in these functions and accountability. There appeared to be a distinct separation between the elements intended for support and those meant for accountability. For example, in Baltimore, this split was intentional. The network was designed to support principals and the executive director’s role was to assure accountability. A similar pattern emerged in Montgomery County.

**Accountability and support in Baltimore.** In Baltimore, principals spoke of the executive directors as “coaches” and “partners,” but they emphasized that their true role was one of supervision and accountability. The district had provided executive directors extensive training in how to take on a more coach-like role in their interactions with principals. Each executive director had a personal coach who followed executive directors in their work, visited at least once a month, and gave feedback. Most principals seemed to appreciate the orientation of executive directors as coaches and several discussed with gratitude how their executive director actually watched them work and listened before suggesting new approaches. For example, one principal talked about the
role of executive director as a “partner” who “puts a different eye on the school.” Indeed, many of the principals interviewed referred to their executive director as a “partner” in their work. Said one principal speaking of her executive director, “What’s great is we’ve been able to partner together for our school.”

But, principals mostly referred to their executive director as a supervisor and someone who held them accountable, particularly in the areas of instruction and student achievement outcomes (i.e. test scores). Principals said they worked closely with their executive director to develop their school improvement plans, which included specific targets on the state test. According to principals, executive directors then held them accountable to carry out those plans. As one high school principal said, “You’re constantly trying to plan ahead, but at the same time, you’ve got things that are just going to happen, that may just turn you 180 degrees. My ED is there to turn me back.”

Baltimore principals also found that the amount of time executive directors spent with them at their schools mattered a lot. Principals were more willing to be held accountable by someone who knew the problems they faced at their school, and who they saw as a partner in the improvement process. The principal at an elementary school that had been sanctioned under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) for the past three years spoke positively about how the day-to-day presence of his executive director made him feel both “supervised” and “supported.”

I think I see him [executive director] more than I see my wife, this guy. But, now I feel supported; now, I’m being supervised. Under the previous [executive director] system, I really wasn’t being supervised. It was just, “Hey this is what you do.” If I did it, “Good.” But now I’m being supervised. He doesn’t have to
yell or scream but whether he whispers or whether he yells, you still have to do it. He lets you know, “This is what I’m seeing and these are my expectations.”

While every executive director worked differently, most visited schools once or twice a month. According to principals, visits typically lasted two or three hours during which executive directors visited classrooms with principals, reviewed professional development plans, and analyzed student data. The focus of the visits was almost entirely about instruction, professional development, and accountability. A middle school principal explained what a standard interaction with her executive director looked like,

We walk to classrooms and look at teaching using the new instructional framework that the district has put in place. Then, we come back sit down and talk about the practices we see the teachers using in the classrooms and how those practices are effective. If they’re not effective, we look at all their [teachers’] outcomes and professional development. How does professional development improve teachers’ practice? How are teachers, as a result, moving students academically? It is that kind of in-depth work.

If there were serious problems with teachers’ instructional practices, principals spoke of executive directors sharing the accountability to make changes. Principals said executive directors had a sense “ownership” over what was going on in the classroom. As one high school principal commented

Now I’m going to tell you this. I don’t trust everyone at central office. But I just think it’s clear that my ED is coming from a different perspective. He said to me, ‘If you’re on a PIP [Performance Improvement Plan] that means I’m on a PIP.’ That’s ownership. That’s being held accountable.
Accountability and support in Montgomery County. In Montgomery County, principals felt accountable to their community superintendents and the joint district-union PAR process for administrators. The community superintendents used checklists and monitoring calendars to drive periodic discussions with principals, which focused almost entirely on formative and summative assessment results. Community superintendents rarely visited classrooms; their role was almost entirely focused on accountability. Each semester principals met with their community superintendent for a formal supervisory school visit. At the meeting, the community superintendent shared written performance feedback referencing standards and citing evidence. The formal visit was followed up by monthly memos and data requests. As one principal explained, “Every month, they [community superintendents] send us all sorts of stuff, what they call monitoring protocol. Every now and again, they say, ‘Well how are you doing? Can we add to it?’ But really, it comes just monthly, and it is performance results, monthly reminders, ‘Are you checking this? Are you doing that?’”

According to Superintendent Josh Starr, who was in his first year in the position at the time of data collection, the community superintendent role had created some unproductive fear and anxiety among principals in the district. He had plans to shift that relationship to one that emphasized support and partnership. The superintendent explained: “They [principals] want support from community superintendents. They want to be valued as partners.” Principals seemed to agree that something needed to change about the role. As one representative statement from a principal illustrates: “The monitoring calendars have good questions, but give me a break, I haven’t looked at one
of these for years. Now nobody’s said to me, ‘Do you really use it?’ or anything like that, but it’s there.”

However, the community superintendents still viewed their role as primarily one of monitoring, supervision, and accountability. As one community superintendent described her current role, “You know, we’re heavy into monitoring, disaggregating that data because we want to demonstrate that we’re making progress in closing the achievement gap.” In addition, there were other senior leaders in the district who believed that monitoring and performance reviews were an essential task in managing a district the size of Montgomery County. As one remarked, “When principals don’t do such a good job, you have to tell them. You really have to confront them with documentation, with specificity when there are some concerns. Providing support doesn’t mean you don’t hold people accountable.”

It is unclear whether future changes to the community superintendent role will have the effect the Superintendent intends. As far as principals were concerned, there hadn’t been any noticeable shifts in the ways they interacted with their community superintendent. However, principals did acknowledge that they had heard the role was going to change. Specifically, they were told that the community superintendents were expected to spend more of their time in schools, visiting classrooms and talking with principals. The story heard from many principals was that community superintendents were expected to spend 70% of their time in schools and 30% in the central office. But that ratio had yet to be realized, according to community superintendents and principals. With a span of oversight that still averaged 35 schools and with only one assigned support staff member, community superintendents spent much of their time monitoring
school performance, responding to complaints and crises, and serving on central office committees.

Principals also saw their own PAR process as providing accountability, but with complementary support. They felt the PAR process held them accountable in a transparent and collaborative manner that used multiple evaluators and specific standards. Principals also saw PAR as offering support for their continued growth. A middle school principal with 28 years in the district and member of the principal PAR panel explained, “Our role definitely is, ‘How can we help? What can we do? What suggestions do we have or has this person been provided with X, Y or Z?’” And at times, that learning and support went both directions. Another member of the principal’s PAR panel found that she learned a great deal from the program serving novice principals. In fact, she brought along a pad of paper to all the PAR meetings in order to capture new ideas: “I always go with a little pad because I get some amazing tips and things I want to bring to my school; I hope I’m being helpful but I also am taking something away from it as well.”

Summary

Principals in Baltimore and Montgomery County shared decisions with the central office in three functions: budgeting, staffing, and academic programming. By examining how principals interacted with the central office in these functions, we understand how principals view their role and work in the district. Across the two districts, principals expressed a need for their interactions with the central office to enable local-level leadership, provide flexibility to meet diverse school needs, and balance accountability and support.
Chapter 5: Two Very Different Central Office-School Approaches

One key difference between the central office-school relationships in Baltimore and Montgomery County was who or what principals interacted with from central office in the three functions. Loose coupling theory (LCT) defines these connecting points in organizations as “elements” (Wieck, 1976). Applied to the organizational behavior of school districts, LCT pushes scholars to identify the specific elements that are connected between the central office and schools. This feature of LCT addresses an important gap in research about central office-school relationships, which often focuses on the content of the interaction, rather than the elements linked (e.g. Coburn & Russell, 2008; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Daly & Finnigan, 2010). By applying LCT and analyzing how principals interact with the central office in Baltimore and Montgomery County, we can see how the structure of those interactions relates to the work of principals. Such findings could inform the approaches school districts use to encourage more effective and efficient central office-school relationships.

Using the lens of LCT, I mapped out the various central office elements principals interacted with in Baltimore and Montgomery County. This is an essential first step—defining who and what is connected at the school and central office levels—in using LCT to analyze the organizational behavior of school districts. Principals’ connections with the central office must be identified before examining whether any interaction results in loose or tight coupling (Weick, 1982).

I found that principals in Baltimore and Montgomery County offered very different descriptions of the elements—individuals, committees, and learning communities—they interacted with in the central office. In Baltimore, principals
primarily interacted with a network structure composed of individuals representing functional central office departments. The central office elements in Baltimore were individuals in the support network, the executive director, and central office staff in monthly leadership academies. Principals in Montgomery County interacted with a mix of individuals, committees, and learning communities. The elements in their interactions with the central office consisted of individuals in functional departments and collaborative district-union structures. Furthermore, in Montgomery County the teachers and administrators’ unions played an essential role in principals’ relationships with the central office.

In this chapter, I provide detailed descriptions of principals’ central office interactions in Baltimore and Montgomery County. I focus on how the elements and structure of the central office-school relationship differ in the two districts.

**The Decentralized Network Approach in Baltimore**

At the time of data collection in the spring of 2012, Baltimore was four years into a significant shift in the way principals interacted with the central office. Led by CEO Andrés Alonso, the district had moved from an approach that connected principals with individuals located at the central office in functional positions to one built on a system of school support networks. From 2007 through 2011, the district devolved the functional staff positions previously located at the central office into 16 school support networks, each with 8 to 15 schools. Each support network included a facilitator and a support team representing key functions in the district, such as human resources, curriculum, and budgeting. In addition, an executive director assigned to each network assumed responsibility for evaluating and coaching principals. The new approach was not simply
a change of office space for central office administrators. The shift to the network support structure and executive directors accompanied the significant decentralization of decisions in the three functions. Principals were given more much control over decisions in budgeting, staffing, and academic programming.

According to central office administrators and internal documents, the move to support networks and executive directors was part of an overall strategy to build a system of “bounded autonomy” for the schools. This concept denotes flexibility at the school level, but with a set of “common standards” across the system. Slide presentations by central office leaders about the strategy explained that bounded autonomy meant that principals generally had the authority to make most decisions in their schools, but that there was a “set of parameters” that remained the same across all schools. As Alonso said, “There’s an assertion of a standard, an expectation of what should be happening in schools. I don’t want to walk into a school and see kids outside of classrooms or taking ten minutes when the bell rings. That’s not about autonomy. That’s about standards.”

In the move to bounded autonomy, principals were given more control over decisions in budgeting, staffing, and academic programming, but the networks were designed to ensure some consistency across the system. For example, principals controlled approximately 80% of the funds in their schools and the budgeting support staff member in the network provided district tools and resources to make sure those funds were spent within guidelines. Principals’ interactions with the central office also included monthly leadership academies. Each of these three components—network support teams led by facilitators, executive directors, and leadership academies—were key elements in principals’ interactions with the central office.
Network support teams and network facilitators. Every school and principal in Baltimore—including the 35 charter schools in the district—was assigned to a network team. Led by a facilitator, network teams were composed of five to eight specialists including curriculum directors, a human capital expert, and a budgeting analyst. The network facilitator’s main responsibility, according to internal training documents and central office administrator interviews, was to establish a trusting relationship with the principals in their network and coordinate the network specialists to support the principals’ needs. The facilitator did not evaluate principals and there was an explicit emphasis on the role of support. Indeed, the hiring process for network facilitators was designed to screen out candidates who relied on evaluative and coercive language when trying to solve problems working with others. According to one central office administrator, the successful facilitator could not use “hierarchical command and control tactics to get things done.” In the interview process for selecting facilitators there was a simulated meeting between candidates and a principal. During the role play, interviewers intentionally pushed candidates into taking on an accountability role. As one network facilitator described: “We actually role play the situation and throw things out there to see if the person’s frame is going to be a critical friend that is guiding and pushing you but without stepping over that line into accountability. Because if I'm pushing you into accountability, you’re no longer going to trust me to support you.” Candidates who did step over the fine line into an accountability role were not offered positions as facilitators.

Principals agreed that the roles of the network and facilitator were fundamentally about support. The principal of a large and struggling high school explained that he could be candid about the problems facing his school because he felt the networks were
there for support: “They’re supposed to help me. I don’t have to hide my problem from them because it’s their job to help me.” Another principal of an elementary-middle school spoke candidly about how network specialists were focused on helping, not accountability: “It’s going to sound corny but I love my network because the purpose of the network is exactly that. It’s support. You don’t feel like somebody’s coming in and evaluating—it’s that you feel very relaxed, very calm. It’s strictly support.”

From the perspective of principals in Baltimore, the network frequently brought the functions of the central office they needed the most support from—budgeting, curriculum, and staffing—closer to their schools. Principals often described network specialists as having firsthand knowledge about their needs, and the capacity to meet those needs. The principal of a higher-performing admissions-based high school explained how the network specialists provided tailored support to her school: “What they’re [network specialists] doing is learning about the schools so that they can facilitate whatever our needs are.”

In many ways, the support network formalized the informal interactions principals previously had with individuals in functional central office departments. Principals with experience in the district before the implementation of support networks said that in the past they had to rely on informal connections to get the support they needed. When the informal relationship did not exist, principals were forced to work through formal department channels, which required written requests and took more time. An elementary school principal who had been in various leadership roles in the district for 25 years explained how it worked before the networks: “There was the science guru in central office. I knew that I could contact that particular person to get something done.
Or I knew that if anybody wanted anything done in scheduling, you had to go through this particular John.” The support network formalized these past interactions with the central office that existed primarily through individual contacts. As one middle school principal said, “The elements of what we used to know as being at central—finance, curriculum, human capital—has broken down into a network variant. There was a network prior but now you don’t have to try to finagle through all of the different offices.”

It is important to emphasize that the support networks emerged over time. When Alonso first entered Baltimore and began decentralizing decisions to principals through bounded autonomy, the networks did not exist. They formed a year later because principals requested more support from the central office for their newfound autonomy. Initially, the networks only consisted of a staffing specialist, budget analyst, and curriculum directors. The facilitator’s role was added the following year. It is interesting to note that the networks emerged as a form of greater support from central office after decentralizing decision-making to principals. This paradox is discussed in depth in the next chapter.

**Executive directors.** The executive directors and networks were designed to play distinct, but complementary roles. According to district documents, before the 2011–2012 school year there were two executive directors responsible for supporting all principals in the 204 schools across the district. The span of oversight for each executive director meant the role was primarily about handling crises. As one high school principal commented about the role of the executive director before 2011, “My ED [executive director] oversaw a total of 70 high schools and middle schools. He had all of the high
schools. It was insane and he was in charge of it for maybe three years.” Starting in 2011, the district appointed executive directors to each of the 16 networks. Each executive director oversaw around 10 to 15 schools in the network.

The job description of the executive directors stated that the primary role was to coach and evaluate the principals, particularly in matters involving instruction and teacher development. According to some central office administrators interviewed, the executive directors were primarily responsible for holding principals accountable, while network teams focused on support. One senior central office administrator said the roles for providing support and accountability were split because principals “weren’t taking coaching from the same person they were getting evaluated by and it was confusing.” Consequently, there was an expectation from central office leaders that executive directors would cultivate relationships with principals that reflected executive coaching, but in ways that integrated accountability and evaluation.

**Leadership academy.** The third key element in Baltimore principals’ interactions with the central office were monthly leadership academy conferences. These day-long conferences focused entirely on issues of curriculum and instruction. Principals typically brought an assistant principal and one or two teachers to the conferences. During the 2010-2011 school year, the monthly sessions focused on implementing the Common Core State Standards. In 2011-2012, the leadership academy meetings emphasized providing quality feedback to teachers using the district’s instructional framework. Executive directors played a major role in developing and delivering the sessions, which often involved roundtable discussions between principals and network support staff.
The Centralized Collaborative Approach in Montgomery County

Principals in Montgomery County had very different interactions with the central office. In Montgomery County, principals’ core connections with central office elements consisted of individual staff members in functional central office departments, an assigned community superintendent, and jointly organized district-union committees and meetings. Compared to their contemporaries in Baltimore, principals in Montgomery County had little discretion over decisions in budgeting, staffing, and academic programming. They controlled less than three percent of their school’s budget (with the exception of principals at designated Title I schools) and had little say over the curriculum and pacing. Indeed, in 2012 Montgomery County principals and central office administrators alike said that it would be hard to find a “more centralized” district.

In this section, I describe principals’ centralized and collaborative relationship with the central office in Montgomery County. Elements include central office staff in functional departments around issues of budgeting and staffing, community superintendents about accountability, and district-union committees in the functions of staffing and academic programming, including peer-assistance-and-review (PAR) panels and union-organized professional interest groups.

Central office staff in functional departments. In Montgomery County, principals sought support and permission from individual staff members in functional central office departments in the areas of staffing unit allocation, teacher recruitment, and curriculum. The interactions with these staff members tended to be transactional and conducted via emails and memos. This was partly because principals had little to negotiate with the central office in these functions. Much of the decision making was
driven by transparent and highly formulaic systems and processes. Principals had been assigned central office liaisons in two functional departments—Office of Human Resources and the Office of Curriculum and Instructional Programs—and a direct relationship with the Assistant to the Chief Operating Officer (COO).

In the Office of Human Resources principals were assigned a staff member to support their teacher recruitment and hiring. Because teacher recruitment was conducted centrally, the interactions with the staff member focused on exchanging desired qualifications and lists of potential candidates. An elementary school principal explained how she interacted with her human resource liaison, “I call them directly and e-mail them. We talk. I meet with them and say, ‘Look, we have a need in our school for these things [positions]. How can you help us?’ And we have that open dialog.”

Similarly, principals’ relationships with the Assistant to the COO concerned the allocation of administrative, teacher and support staff positions and were also typically transactional in nature. That is the interactions were guided by formulas disseminated via email or through memos. The formulas determining the number and type of positions each school received were developed through a collaborative process with the three employee unions in Montgomery County. The district then published and disseminated that information to all principals. This “staffing guidelines” document provided allocation formulas for 49 different positions in the district at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. For example, in 2012 the number of middle school classroom teacher positions for each school was determined by the formula: $(enrollment \times number\ of\ periods) \div (class\ size \times 5)$. The staffing guidelines did take into account schools with varying needs and those serving higher percentages of students with special needs—low-
income, language minority, special education—received more staffing units. As an example, elementary schools with more than 70% of students who were eligible for a free or reduced priced lunch received a first and second grade teaching position for every 19 students. Schools with a smaller percentage were allocated first and second grade classroom positions at a ratio of 27 to 1.

Because the guidelines document established the number and composition of staffing in every school, there was little room for negotiation. Indeed, one person, the Assistant to the COO, handled all questions or concerns about staffing allocations for the 202 principals in the district. Adjustments were very rare and only made if there were significant changes in student enrollment. A central office administrator and former principal explained the rationale for the formulas: “We need to be consistent. We don’t want people to be able to say, ‘Why is my kid’s school so different from this kid’s school. Across the way they get X, Y, and Z and we don’t have any of that in our school.’”

The interactions between principals and the central office around academic programming were more complex, but still retained many of the same characteristics found in staffing. Principals had liaisons in the Office of Curriculum and Instructional Programs to whom they could reach out for support in securing materials or implementing curricula. And like staffing, the interactions with those liaisons typically occurred through emails or memos. The main difference was that academic programming cut across functional departments in Montgomery County. According to central office administrators and principals, there were three additional offices—Office of Technology, Office of Human Resources, and Office of School Performance—that had
some input or influence on the principals’ interactions with the central office in academic
programming. The Office of Technology had become more involved in academic
programming with the implementation of “Curriculum 2.0,” an initiative in the district to
implement the Common Core State Standards and move lesson planning to an online
platform. The Office of Human Resources was involved in academic programming via
the staffing allocation and recruitment processes. Finally, the Office of School
Performance, which housed the Community Superintendents, was involved in academic
programming through accountability for pacing and student achievement.

The cross-cutting nature of academic programming had created some challenges
for principals in their interactions with the central office in this function. Superintendent
Josh Starr summarized the problem, “There are four different offices that all believe that
they are the foundation, the wellspring of changing instruction practice. While it
promotes sharing of information, it enables political battles.” The result for principals
was a deluge of memos about academic programming from the central office. A
principal remarked about one piece of advice he would give central office leaders about
efforts in academic programming, “Stop sending me a million memos. We had 50
memos between August and September and none of us could keep up. They need to
coordinate better; there are areas where it is overlapping. It’s repetitively redundant,
okay?” A high school principal with 22 years in the district concurred: “It’s a memo
trail. That’s one of the things that we feel, as principals, that slows or hinders some of
the processes and things that we want to put in place.” A principal at one of the highest
performing elementary schools in the district put it bluntly: “Stop sending me 55 million
memos.” These principals’ remarks about memo overload highlight one challenge of
Montgomery County’s centralized approach. Principals felt that communication in this case was one-directional and did not meet their needs.

**Community superintendents.** In Montgomery County, principals’ interactions with the central office also included the community superintendent. There were six community superintendent positions located within the Office of School Performance. Each community superintendent oversaw approximately 35 to 45 schools, which were organized roughly into geographic regions. The community superintendent was considered a senior level administrative position in the district and responsible for evaluating principals, although, not to hire or fire them. As one community superintendent explained, “I don’t control that. I don’t hire; I don’t fire, but I supervise and have the documentation and then if someone crosses that line.”

**Role of unions.** The relationship between the central office and the three employees’ unions in Montgomery County was uniquely collaborative. Principals’ interactions with the central office included a number of formal and informal joint district-union leadership teams, committees, and learning communities. These included peer-assistance-and-review (PAR) panels for teachers and administrators, and union-organized meetings and interest groups. In addition, principals and system administrators had representatives from their union—the Montgomery County Association of Administrators and Principals (MCAAP)—on three senior leadership teams in the district, the association leaders-deputy superintendent-chief operating officer (ADC) committee, budget committee, and executive leadership team.

**PAR panels.** Montgomery County had separate PAR programs that covered teachers and school administrators in the district. The main components of each program
were relatively similar. Each served two types of employees: 1) Novices who had no previous work experience in their position in Montgomery County; and 2) Experienced employees recommended to PAR if they received a below-standard evaluation. Each program was governed by a 16-member PAR panel composed of equal numbers of representatives from the employee group and their supervisors. For example, the PAR panel for teachers was co-chaired by the vice-presidents of the teachers’ union and MCAAP, and included six teachers and six principals. Similarly, the 16-member PAR panel for principals was chaired by the vice president of MCAAP and the deputy superintendent, and included six principals selected by MCAAP and six senior central office administrators chosen by the district.

Another key component of the PAR programs was the role of the consultant. In the PAR program for teachers, the consulting teacher or “CT” provided support to novice or struggling teachers by helping plan and model lessons, providing resources, team-teaching, conducting observations, and evaluating. The consulting principal or “CP” in the PAR program for principals played a similar role. At the end of the year the PAR panel reviewed both the consultants’ and supervisors’ recommendations and chose among a number of options, which included dismissal, continued support, or successful exit from program.

**MCAAP professional learning communities.** Principals also spoke about MCAAP-organized professional learning communities as another element in their relationship with the central office. There were 11 job-alike learning communities that met at MCAAP’s monthly meetings. These learning communities served as informal influencers on central office policies. Central office leaders routinely went to the
professional learning communities to discuss new initiatives and gain feedback on the implementation of current projects. One principal, who was an active member of the middle school professional learning community, explained how the informal group interacted with the central office and provided feedback to the system: “Central office will spend 90 minutes with us finding out things that haven’t been working or barriers to getting what we need. We talk about a whole bunch of different things and they take that back.”

*Senior leadership teams.* Principals also cited their union representation on senior leadership teams in the district as another element in their interactions with the central office. Although most of the principals did not sit on these senior leadership teams, they felt their concerns were voiced well by their elected MCAAP leaders who were members of these teams. The eight-member Association Leaders-Deputy Superintendent-Chief Operating Officer (ADC) committee was composed of the Chief Operation Officer, Deputy Superintendent, and the presidents and executive directors from each of the three employees’ unions. Principals viewed the ADC as having the most influence on their relationship with the central office. It had the broad charge of “addressing matters of mutual interest or concern” and was used as the district’s senior leadership team. The members of the ADC were joined by two representatives from the PTA to create the budget committee. The budget committee crafted the district’s first budget recommendations and then sat down with the superintendent for another round of meetings to finalize the system’s budget. MCAAP leaders also sat on a larger district-wide Executive Leadership Team (ELT), which was charged with reviewing and updating the annual strategic plan and examining system-wide targets and data.
Two Very Different Approaches

Principals in Baltimore and Montgomery County interacted with the central office in very different ways (see Figure 2 for a summary illustration). In Baltimore, principals largely connected with liaisons of functional central office departments—curriculum, staffing, and budgeting—in their assigned support networks. They also received coaching and support from the Executive Director. Monthly leadership academies formed a third key element in principals’ interactions with the central office.

Montgomery County principals interacted with different elements in the central office that included a mix of individuals and committees. They connected to individual staff members in the central office departments, such as a staffing support person in Human Resources and the assistant to the COO. Community superintendents served in an accountability and monitoring role. A complex ecosystem of joint district-union committees and teams complemented these elements. PAR panels supported principals in teacher evaluation and in their own growth. Union-organized professional learning communities served as a feedback mechanism to the central office, and principals felt their input was provided via several collaborative senior leadership teams.
Figure 2. Principals’ Interactions with the Central Office in Baltimore and Montgomery County

In the next chapter, I explore how these interactions relate to the districts’ overall approaches and their outcome. Specifically, I look at whether Baltimore’s decentralized approach described here produced a loosely coupled relationship. Similarly, I assess if Montgomery County’s centralized approach led to a more tightly coupled relationship between principals and the central office.
Chapter 6: How Loose and Tight Coupling Emerge

The interactions between principals and the central office in Baltimore and Montgomery County were not only very different, but they also were dynamic and produced different outcomes. Whether the approaches in each district—centralization and decentralization—produced their intended outcomes appeared to be influenced by two key factors. One was the capacity of principals across schools in each district. The other factor was principals’ perceptions of the capacity of the central office to respond to their needs. Loose coupling theory (LCT) provides a framework for examining the outcomes—loose or tight coupling—of the different approaches and how the capacities of principals and the central office affected those outcomes.

In the context of the central office-school relationship, loose coupling implies that there is a high degree of variability or distinctiveness in practices across schools, and consequently in the relationship that schools have with the central office. For example, if there were a loosely coupled relationship between the central office and principals in teacher hiring, one might expect to see high variability in the hiring process across schools. Some principals might involve teachers in the interview process, others might make the hiring decision unilaterally, a few might have teachers conduct a practice lesson. In carrying out their distinctive practices in teacher hiring across schools, principals would also have highly variable interactions with the central office. A tightly coupled relationship between the central office and principals would mean that practices across schools were relatively consistent and exhibit very little distinctiveness. In Montgomery County, the interactions between the central office and principals around teacher recruitment had the characteristics of tight coupling. Nearly all principals carried
out the work of teacher recruitment in uniform ways—they asked their liaison in human resources for a list of qualified candidates. In these examples, loose coupling in teacher hiring and tight coupling in teacher recruitment emerged as a result of the interaction between principals and the central office. That is, tight and loose coupling were the outcomes of the relationship.

It is important to understand that loose and tight coupling may or may not be connected to the approach a district takes in managing its relationship with schools. For example, a district may have a centralized teacher recruitment process where the central office does all advertising for open positions, holds job fairs, and maintains formal relationships with universities to recruit candidates. The goal of the approach is that principals would then work with the central office to find candidates to interview for open positions. Practices around teacher recruitment would be mostly consistent or tightly coupled across schools. However, the outcome of the interactions with the central office about teacher recruitment could also lead to loose coupling. Indeed, that is what happened with teacher recruitment in Baltimore. The district had a centralized approach for recruiting teachers, but the outcome was a loosely coupled one.

In Figure 3, I summarize the link between the districts’ approaches and the outcomes that emerged as principals interacted with the central office. The arrows indicate the dynamic nature of the interactions in a particular function. For example, in Montgomery County the central office-school relationship around academic programming was flux. As the district began implementing Common Core State Standards through its Curriculum 2.0 initiative, it was shifting from a centralized approach and tightly coupled outcome, to a more decentralized approach and loosely
coupled outcome. Academic programming in Baltimore was undergoing changes as well. The decentralized approach and loosely coupled outcome were moving towards a more centralized approach and tightly coupled outcome as the district also implemented the Common Core State Standards.

![Figure 3](image-url)  
*Figure 3.* Examples of district approaches and the coupling outcomes of those approaches.

In this chapter, I describe what loose and tight coupling looked like in practice in the functions of budgeting, staffing, and academic programming and show how principals in the same district can experience the coupling process differently within the same
function. For example, in Montgomery County, some, but not all, principals reported having a tightly coupled relationship with the central office in budgeting. I also illustrate how tight and loose coupling emerge over time, and whether the outcome is aligned with a particular approach. I find that the factors that seem to matter the most in producing loose or tight coupling are the capacity of principals and the perceptions principals have of central office’s capacity to respond to their needs. For example, tight coupling appeared to emerge within a function when principals believed the central office was meeting their needs.

The chapter is organized around the functions of budgeting, staffing, and academic programming. For each function, I describe whether the interactions between principals and the central office in Baltimore and Montgomery County produced loose coupling or tight coupling. Then, using focused examples, I illustrate how the approach each district took—centralized or decentralized—aligned with the intended outcome of tight or loose coupling.

**Mixed Coupling in Budgeting in Montgomery County**

Most principals in Montgomery County described their interactions with the central office as having features of tight coupling. That is, practices around budgeting were standardized and very similar across schools. Principals said there was very little variability across schools in how funds were used, mostly because they simply did not have any money to spend beyond funds for instructional materials. The principal at an average-sized elementary school in Montgomery County received about $15,000 for instructional materials. Furthermore, those funds had tight restrictions and were subject
to a comprehensive auditing process in which principals had to produce a written report to their community superintendent about how their money was spent.

Indeed, the lack of control over their budgets left some principals feeling beholden to the central office for any improvements to their schools. For example, one high school principal explained how she had to “beg” a senior central office administrator for money to improve the academic program in her school. For principals in Montgomery County, asking the central office for additional funds that could be used flexibly at the school level was taboo. In this case, the high school principal wondered whether the senior administer would think of her as “this renegade principal out there soliciting funds.” During her conversation with the administrator the principal didn’t even use the words “money” or “funds.” She just asked the central office administrator for “permission to do the program,” knowing that if permission were granted funds would be required for implementation.

There were, however, some principals in Montgomery County who experienced a more loosely coupled relationship around budgeting with the central office. These were principals of schools at two extremes in community wealth. Principals at designed Title I schools—those serving the highest percentages of low-income students—and principals at some of the wealthiest schools in the district described a more loosely coupled relationship with the central office in budgeting. As discussed in Chapter 4, principals at Title I schools could decide how to use the additional funds, as long as they met certain Title I policy requirements. The principal at a Title I school talked about how he was able to use funds flexibly: “That’s the blessing of having an additional, flexible budget,
to sort of fill in your gaps, and that's the comfort that we have here. Even when everything shrinks, I can still take care of my remainders in a healthy way.”

Principals in wealthier communities also spoke about having greater control over funds raised by their PTAs and local parents. These principals considered themselves lucky to have a say in how additional funds were used. For example, the principal at one elementary school with its own foundation, talked about how he was able to use funds raised to strengthen the arts. “They fund us to a tune of $18,000, $19,000. So that’s something that we have been very fortunate in this part of the county to be able to add and augment by having a very strong community.” Another principal at an elementary school with its own foundation commented on how he worked with it to upgrade facilities and provide teachers special grants for projects: “I sit on the board of the foundation and what we’ve been doing is approving mini grants. Say a teacher needs $900 to do a special project, so the teacher will write a grant, requesting those materials.” The principal went on to explain that the additional funds had provided reading specialists with a new diagnostic program that cost $1,700. The foundation had provided $15,000 to $20,000 worth of grants over the last few years.

The Evolution of Budgeting in Baltimore

The tightly and loosely coupled relationships in budgeting emerged over time as principals interacted with their central offices in Baltimore and Montgomery County. This is most evident in the example of the evolution of the budgeting relationship in Baltimore. Over the course of five years, the budgeting relationship between principals and the central office progressed from tight coupling to loose coupling, and then began trending back towards a tighter coupling, although, principals described the relationship
as fundamentally one that is still loosely coupled. The dynamic coupling outcome was the result of principals engaging with staff members in the central office and in their support networks over time. They responded to the central office reforms in budgeting and then advocated and negotiated for greater support or autonomy, depending on their needs.

In 2007, the approach to budgeting in Baltimore resembled that of Montgomery County in some ways. Baltimore principals controlled less than 5% of their overall budgets. But unlike Montgomery County principals, Baltimore principals felt the allocation of resources under this old system was inequitable and opaque. For example, one principal recalled, “I didn’t even know what my total budget was, but what I could see and control was only about $14,000. Textbooks wouldn’t arrive and teachers would be angry, but all I could do was call somebody in central office and beg them to deliver.”

When Superintendent Alonso arrived and introduced autonomy for principals, he overhauled the budgeting system with the implementation of Fair Student Funding (FSF). FSF sought to decentralize decision-making in budgeting and give principals discretion over how to spend most of the money allocated to their schools. Under FSF, every student was assigned a base amount of funding with additional funds allocated for students who scored low on the state test and needed extra instruction. Additionally, extra funds were provided for high-achieving students who scored in the advanced or gifted category. Within two years of the implementation of FSF, principals moved from controlling about 3% of their budgets to 80%.

The move to decentralize budgeting decisions, paradoxically, generated greater demand from principals for central office support. As one principal described, “There’s a
lot on the plate. You can’t be manager, administrator and instructional leader all at once—it’s just impossible to do it all.” In turn, the central office found it difficult to respond to the needs of principals as they wrestled with the changes of FSF. “Instead of saying where the restrictions are,” explained one district employee, “you say everything is on the table. It was hard for us here in central office because that’s not the way we had thought about the work.” According to Alonso, “We knew there were going to be people who were going to see this challenge as ‘what the hell are they doing to us?’ not as, ‘we have this extraordinary opportunity now to create schools from scratch.’”

Rather than scaling back FSF in the face of these challenges, district officials acknowledged the need for more training and support for principals. In addition to issuing guidance documents that described basic components of the school budget, during the second year of FSF the district introduced the support networks, which included a budgeting specialist. The guidance documents and networks were intended to assist principals with budgeting and bring some consistency in practices across schools.

Despite the additional support from the central office in budgeting, principals still consistently described their interactions with the central office around budgeting in terms that could be characterized as loose coupling. Baltimore principals said they had “freedom” to choose how their budgets were allocated, and many talked about the unique approaches they could take with the flexibility. They also said that the autonomy in budgeting was essential because of the accountability they felt for improving student performance. As an elementary school principal said, without control of the budget, principals were just “puppets” and it would be impossible to hold them accountable for results: “To me you’re not the principal or you’re not the head of any organization if you
don’t even have the final say on how you spend your money. You can’t hold me accountable for test scores if I think I know how to fix it but I have to do it your way.” Another principal in Baltimore noted that the loosely coupled relationship with the central office over budgeting also allowed her to respond to unique community and student needs in creative ways: “Autonomy in budgeting allows us to create the type of staff we feel that our community needs and our students need. It allows you to be creative.”

Montgomery County administrators seemed to understand that changing the district’s approach to budgeting would involve similarly dynamic and ongoing interactions. Senior central office leaders there acknowledged that principals wanted more flexibility in budgeting. But, they felt that most principals did not have the capacity to do their own budgeting. According to one district administrator, there were challenges with principals following protocols for the limited amount of money they did control. “One of our biggest issues is appropriate utilization of funds they [principals] maintain in the schools…it’s challenging, yeah, so, again, we don’t give them a lot of autonomy right now in terms of making those decisions.” There was also the belief that giving principals more autonomy over the budget would detract from their focus on academic programming. Another district administrator commented: “I believe that you can make principals into financial managers but it’s going to take a lot away from the instructional work that they do.” It was clear that if Montgomery County started to decentralize budgeting decisions as Baltimore did, there would be a need to train and support principals.
Tight and Loose Coupling in Staffing in Both Districts

The central office-school relationship in staffing experienced by principals in both districts had characteristic of both loose and tight coupling. In teacher hiring, principals described their relationship with the central office as being mostly loosely coupled. In most cases, they had control over how and whom they hired, as long as the selected candidate met minimum qualifications. Although, in some special circumstances, that loosely coupled relationship had to be negotiated with the central office. Further, even when a relationship was tightly coupled, such as the staffing allocation process in Montgomery County, principals still negotiated with the central office. The interactions between the central office and principals in teacher recruitment were tightly coupled in Montgomery County and loosely coupled in Baltimore. Interestingly, the loosely coupled teacher recruitment relationship in Baltimore was not by design, but developed because the central office had not been responsive to principals’ needs.

Decentralized approaches and loose coupling in hiring. In general, principals in both districts indicated that they had discretion over whom they hired. In Baltimore and Montgomery County, principals talked about their need to control the hiring process and who ended up in their buildings. For example, in Baltimore, a high school principal explained how she appreciated that she could identify someone to hire and make the hiring decision on her own: “As long as they qualify, I have the final say. I just push it through to human capital and say, ‘I have a candidate that I’m interested in hiring.’ It gives me control over my building.” Principals in Montgomery County had similar control over hiring decisions in their schools. Said one elementary school principal about how the loosely coupled relationship in hiring allows her to meet the needs of students:
“I really do feel I have the flexibility to meet the needs of my school in hiring. Once we have a list of candidates HR does not get involved, not even to say, ‘What are you nuts hiring that person?’”

Although principals in both districts said they had a loosely coupled relationship with the central office over hiring, there were a few special circumstances involving contractual obligations where that loose coupling had to be negotiated. For example, the teachers’ contracts in Baltimore and Montgomery County gave preference to years of experience if layoffs occur. So, if positions did need to be cut due to declining enrollments or budget reductions, teachers with the fewest years of experience were let go first. If the layoffs affected teachers with tenure, then the districts were obligated to place those teachers into open positions for which they were qualified. These were the consequences of having a standardized contract district-wide as well as district-based layoff procedures.

The placement process could, in some cases, constrain the loosely coupled relationship in hiring between principals and the central office. For example, a high school principal in Baltimore described an incident where the staffing specialist wanted to assign an excessed librarian to an open position. However, the principal argued that the candidate she wanted had special skills and, with the support of her executive director, she was eventually able to hire this individual. The principal explained, “I had the support of my ED and they were able to say, ‘Stop your process on this end because the school needs this. This principal is justified with this particular need. Give that school the autonomy to be able to hire this person’”
Montgomery County principals also described having to advocate for their loosely coupled relationship in hiring. For example, one principal at a high performing elementary school negotiated with the central office not to take a 5th grade teacher by accepting another excessed person. At first, the principal told his staffing liaison, “Please don’t place anyone here. The community will go ballistic.” He then negotiated with the staffing liaison to accept the placement of another excessed person, but only for a half-time position. The principal recalled the staffing liaison telling him, “If you take her, your other open position is off the list.” For the principal, the ability to hire whomever he wanted was a battle worth fighting with the central office: “I certainly don’t advertise it because it’s sort of self-preservation, to be honest. It’s selfish I know but I have to look out for the school.”

Another elementary school principal in Montgomery County concurred that the placement of excessed teachers sometimes limited autonomy in hiring. She described how her staffing specialist in the central office would sometimes tell her she had to “suck it up” and take an excessed teacher: “They’ll say, ‘This is the one you’ve got to suck up. There’s no other school in the system with this one job.’” But, it was only after conducting her own due diligence that the principal accepted the transfer: “I called. I looked. I made sure there were no other openings. So, fine. I’ve got to take this one.” The placement of the teacher did not signify the end of interactions with the central office about teacher hiring. As the principal explained, she will “remember it” and “not do it for two years in a row.” She went on to say, “We play games like that, and that’s where the professional respect comes in. That’s where relationships come in.”
Negotiating tight coupling in staffing allocation. Even when the relationship in a particular function was firmly tightly coupled, there was still a considerable amount of negotiation between principals and the central office. For example, in Montgomery County nearly all school-level positions were allocated using the established staffing guidelines. The guidelines were applied consistently across schools and there was very little variability in how positions were distributed. However, that did not mean that principals accepted the results without discussion or attempts to adapt the allocations to fit their school’s needs. Again, principals engaged with the central office to negotiate some autonomy to fit their needs in the tightly coupled relationship.

Principals could trade partial positions as long as the trades were budget-neutral and for similar position types. For example, principals might trade a .2 teaching position for a .5 para-educator position because the trade was budget neutral and involved instructional-based positions. However, principals could not trade a .2 teaching position for more secretarial positions or try to boost that .2 position to a .5 by requesting more slots than allotted by the guidelines. Nearly all the principals interviewed traded positions after receiving their allocation. Principals also noted they had some flexibility around how positions were implemented in schools. One principal explained how she used an allocated English language learner position flexibly by having the teacher in that position also teach one class of reading. That principal felt she “really does have the ability to be creative in staffing.” She explained that principals might be “given your numbers” but when it came to how those positions were used, there was some flexibility. The principal explained, “If I have to have somebody teach one time out of content, I can do that.”
However, some principals noted that certain swaps were harder to make than others. For example, one principal cited how she converted a reading specialist position into a classroom teacher position, but could not trade a counseling position for a teacher position. As the principal said: “I would have to jump through a zillion hoops to say, ‘I don’t really need four counselors. I only need three and a half counselors and I want to take that counseling position and put it into teachers.’ Very difficult to make those changes.” Also, more recently, the district gave principals some flexibility over which positions to cut. Rather than telling principals which position would be reduced in the face of budget cuts, the district gave principals a choice in cutting their schools’ media specialist, reading teacher, or counseling position. Of course, one principal cynically explained that the “choice to cut” was cleverly disguised as “increased autonomy over staffing” when it was really the central office forcing controversial and difficult decisions on to principals and insisting that some cuts be made.

**Centralized recruitment approaches produce different coupling outcomes.** In both Baltimore and Montgomery County, principals described a centralized teacher recruitment system. However, principals experienced the effects of the recruitment system differently. In Montgomery County, principals described a tightly coupled relationship with the central office in teacher recruitment. The district held job fairs and partnered with a number of local colleges and universities to recruit candidates. Principals consistently praised the centralized recruitment system and many remarked that the candidates they received from the central office were of high quality. As one high school principal said, “They do a very, very good job. It’s very, very rare that I don’t have some really good choices for any of my openings, based on the names they send me
or resumes they send me.” Another elementary school principal agreed, “I'll vet the candidates with the support of HR. They have tremendous supports in HR.” Across schools there was very little differentiation in the way principals carried out teacher recruitment. Their relationship with the central office in that function was essentially tightly coupled. Nearly all principals worked with their assigned staffing liaison to generate a list of candidates to interview for an open position.

The example of teacher recruitment in Baltimore shows how a centralized approach can sometimes lead to a loosely coupled outcome. Like Montgomery County, Baltimore had periodic job fairs, an online candidate portal, and lists of candidates distributed to principals. However, some of the principals interviewed in Baltimore did not rely on the centralized recruitment for candidates. Instead, they developed their own recruitment processes and only checked in with their staffing specialist in the network to ensure recruited candidates met certification requirements. In this way, principals in Baltimore had a loosely coupled relationship with the central office in terms of teacher recruitment, even though the central office had taken a centralized approach. Principals said that one of the main reasons the loosely coupled relationship developed was that the centralized teacher recruitment system was, from their perspective, ineffective. One elementary-middle school principal commented on the quality of candidates she received from the central office: “There is a list that we can always go to if we find that there are vacancies. I don’t always find those lists as effective as far as the teachers that are on the list.” Instead, the principal developed her own recruiting system by reaching out to local colleges and universities and recruiting student teachers to intern at her school: “I kind of
say I grow my own because I find a relationship with a college or university and I get students who are in their student teacher placement and I work very closely with them.”

In this case, the cause of the misalignment between approach and coupling outcome seems to be, from the perspective of principals, a lack of capacity in the central office to meet principals’ needs in teacher recruitment. Some principals said they did not find that the centralized recruitment activities provided them with a quality pool of candidates for open positions. In response, some principals pursued their own set of recruitment activities, which differed across schools. Thus, despite a centralized approach, teacher recruitment varied across schools.

**Tight and Loose Coupling in Academic Programming**

Similar to staffing, in Baltimore and Montgomery County there was a mix of loose and tightly coupled relationships between principals and the central office in the function of academic programming. However, the mix of coupling was in a state of flux in both districts, primarily in response to the introduction the Common Core State Standards. The interactions and their outcome—loose or tight coupling—between principals and the central office appeared to be rapidly shifting. In Montgomery County, the principals were accustomed to a centralized approach that produced a tightly coupled relationship in academic programming. But, the new Curriculum 2.0 initiative had created some variability across schools in how principals experienced their relationship with the central office around curriculum. The interaction between principals and the central office was leading to a more loosely coupled relationship. Baltimore principals described the reverse as happening in their relationship with the central office in curriculum. The district had taken a decentralized approach that led to loose coupling in
academic programming. But, that relationship was gradually becoming more tightly coupled as the central office responded effectively to principals’ needs, particularly in regards to the Common Core State Standards.

**The shifting tightly-coupled academic program in Montgomery County.** In Montgomery County, most principals described their relationship with the central office in the function of academic programming as being tightly coupled. Some principals interviewed referred to the curriculum as “coming to us” or “given to us.” Yet, for the most part, they commented on that tightly coupled relationship in very positive terms. Most principals felt that the central office provided high-quality curriculum that allowed them to meet the needs of their students, even if they didn’t have a lot of control over it. As one principal commented: “On the positive side the curriculum comes to us. Our teachers aren’t out there writing curriculum. There’s a huge [curriculum] office to provide supports.” There was also a notion that the curriculum was rigorous and allowed for differentiation. A middle school principal reflected on all that the curriculum gave her students: “The county has very much supported us, including giving us an applied robotics class in seventh grade, an introduction to engineering class. We’ve been given software applications.” To her, the curriculum given to her school from the central office provided the “rigorous push only to kids that really are ready for it” and did not “accelerate kids unnecessarily.” In this way, she felt the curriculum truly achieved differentiation for her students.

The curriculum in Montgomery County was developed centrally by the Office of Curriculum and Instructional Programs and implemented district-wide with support through trainings and from content area specialists. Formative and summative
assessments for some courses and subjects ensured that schools follow similar pacing for covering content during the school year. As one principal remarked about whether the district had a “lockstep” approach to academic programming: “So yeah, our teachers are moving together with the curriculum. Are they a couple days off here and there? Yes, okay. That can happen, but generally we are moving through curriculum at the right pace.”

It is important to note that the tightly coupled outcome in curriculum was not uniformly experienced by principals in Montgomery County. Principals at some of the higher performing schools believed they had greater flexibility than their colleagues because the curriculum set the floor and not the ceiling for rigor. Since many of their students were already meeting basic benchmarks, they were able enrich the standard Montgomery County curriculum. As one principal at a top performing elementary school remarked, “I think principals sometimes put up roadblocks that are not there. ‘Well again I have to teach this curriculum or I have to do this.’ No, you don’t, you know? Come on. Stop complaining, figure it out, you know you can do different things differently.” This principal was able to accelerate the writing curriculum in his school after obtaining approval from his community superintendent.

Principals in Montgomery County also had some degree of flexibility over special programming that was in addition to the standard curriculum. But, principals had to secure the funds and support for the program on their own. For example, one middle school principal developed a partnership with the Naval Surface Weapon Center to get an engineer to teach students for 12 weeks. The principal emphasized that the partnership was created without support from the central office: “And that’s of our own doing in
terms of making sure that we’re more interdisciplinary in our approach with our teachers. And that has come out of building a schedule that’s reflective and collaborative in that way.”

During our data collection, Montgomery County was in the midst of a major overhaul of its curriculum. The experience of principals as the district implemented Curriculum 2.0 illustrates how they appreciated a tightly coupled relationship around curriculum, but only because they felt the central office was responsive to their needs. On one hand, principals saw Curriculum 2.0 as a rigorous and impressive curriculum that they were excited to see rolled out. But, on the other hand, they felt frustrated when they were not provided adequate implementation support or direction, and in some cases, preferred a more loosely coupled relationship with the central office when that happened.

Curriculum 2.0 was an effort by the district to integrate the Common Core State Standards and develop an online platform for curriculum, lesson planning, and professional development. In the 2011-2012 school year, the district required schools to implement the curriculum in kindergarten and first grade with second grade being optional. Principals viewed the move as a big shift for teachers from the “inch-wide mile-deep” curriculum to the “mile-deep inch-wide” Common-Core approach to content. One principal described what the change meant for some schools in the system: “We just had your third grader doing seventh grade math, and now we're not doing anything above third grade.” Another remarked: “You’re expected to go deeper. The question is what does that mean? The whole application problem-solving piece is huge and so that’s really been a focus, particularly math, in K1, you know, going deeper, what does that look like on a daily basis.” Principals also seemed to understand that implementing the
Common Core State Standards represented a huge challenge for the district. As one principal said, “I think math has been the trickiest. It’s such a huge just paradigm shift for people, for the way to teach math. I mean it was just acceleration, acceleration. And then it was just like [it came to a] screeching halt.”

Principals had mixed reactions to the rollout of Curriculum 2.0. Some thought that the central office was doing a decent job implementing the new curriculum. Components of Curriculum 2.0 were piloted in some elementary schools in the K-2 grades two or three years before. The district spent time training these “early adopters” and gave them flexibility to pick and choose different components to implement. One principal talked about how he appreciated that flexibility and the “loose-tight” nature of his relationship with the central office around the rollout of Curriculum 2.0: “Central office gave schools some choice in it. Just, you know, give me some choices. Give me the constraints—that loose-tight kind of thing, but just give me some choices within there, and we can make it our own, and so that was very helpful.”

However, other principals thought it would have made a lot more sense to hold off implementing the curriculum until the Common Core standards were finalized. As one principal said about the difficulties in rolling out Curriculum 2.0: “I think the tough thing was that just the Common Core wasn’t created. It was only adopted in 23 states at the time. Now it's up to 45 states and so on, but it wasn't published yet. I mean you're trying to write a curriculum on the Common Core standards, and the Common Core standards haven't been officially dropped out.” The confusion brought with it some communication challenges from the central office to principals and teachers. As one elementary school principal remarked about the rollout of Curriculum 2.0: “Who’s
getting the information first? Are the principals hearing about changes or are the
resource teachers hearing about changes or are the teachers getting e-mails directly?”

Another principal gave a specific example about how the assessments for math in
Curriculum 2.0 were being selected. The district had initially told principals that there
would be a shift in which assessments would be used for math. However, there had yet
to be explicit guidance. At least one principal was frustrated with the ambiguity:
“There’s been communication about it [shift in math assessments] but it’s never been a
definitive answer. No one has come out and said, ‘You should do this.’” According to
the principal, the lack of direction led principals to do different things across the district.
“It’s kind of like what’s the direction on it?” The principal went on to say, “Just give us a
definitive answer and we’re fine.”

That said, the elementary school principals seemed to understand the challenge
the central office was facing in moving to the Common Core. As one principal remarked,
“Yeah, I mean I think you sort of, you know, whenever you look up to central office,
you're, ‘Oh, that's gotta be tough,’ from their perspective.” Principals also saw how the
central office was having to deal with ideological battles with parents and community
members as the new curriculum rolled out. Another principal remarked: “You have this
pocket of parents who want to keep it and don’t want it to go away but you have the other
pocket that says they feel like kids are being accelerated or pushed too hard so you have
these two forces that are pushing against each other. So I don’t envy Dr. Starr because
he’s kinda in the middle and he has to kind of manage.”

**Producing tighter coupling in Baltimore’s academic program.** In Baltimore,
principals were also wrestling with how to implement the Common Core State Standards,
but from a relatively new, decentralized and loosely coupled relationship with the central office. As with budgeting and staffing, the district had initially tried to establish a loosely coupled relationship with principals around the academic program by decentralizing decision-making. By 2008, principals were free to use their budgets to select and purchase curricula for their schools. Some welcomed the flexibility, but others struggled with the new found autonomy. By the following 2009-2010 school year, the district began giving principals more guidance about preferred curricula, specifically in literacy in the early grades. As one principal explained, “The guidance documents say this is what a 90-minute literacy block should look like, this is how time should be used in a seventh grade math class.” Another elementary school principal remarked, “They’re guidelines around what a school should have. But again, they allow me to work with the directors and staff to create the programs for the children.”

The result of the enhanced guidance was that most schools chose the options supported by the district, which produced a more tightly coupled relationship in the academic program. Practices across schools, according to principals, became more consistent around academic programming. The approach included a financial incentive for principals to implement the district’s suggested curricula. The central office provided principals with information, training, and funds for the implementation of their suggested curricula. Schools could opt out and take a different route, but they would have to use their own funding for products and training. For example, the CAO described how this system worked when the district introduced a new progress monitoring assessment system. “Some schools opted for their own, which is fine,” the CAO explained, “but we're literally like 90 percent of our elementary schools use the one assessment.” The
CAO said she “sold [principals] on it first” because progress monitoring was best practice. But, in order to get principals to consistently adopt the preferred assessments they provide an incentive. As she said, “I’m not stupid—we incentivized. We said, ‘We’ll pay if you pick one of the two we picked.”

With the rollout of the Common Core, principals expressed an even greater need for guidance and support from the central office. Several said that the district had really only tackled the “low-hanging fruit” in terms of improving the curriculum, and that the hardest work (e.g. math) was yet to be done. As one principal said, “Now I think that the structure is around instruction. That part has been weak, forever, in our school district. The focus has been on trying to stabilize the schools, keep the kids off the street.” From the principal’s perspective, moving to the next step meant building capacity at both the central office and schools to make informed decisions about academic programming. As one principal remarked, “Helping principals to develop their practice is huge because I think for too long, we were just like, ‘Well, whatever the district tells me to do, I'm gonna do.’ Well, guess what? The district could be wrong, just like the individual principal could be wrong.” Indeed, there was wide agreement from principals that there needed to be more guidance from the central office in curriculum. “My colleagues, I know, will tell you that they need more of the curriculum side,” said one high school principal, “And I agree.”

There was also wide agreement from central office leaders that principals needed more direction in academic programming. However, they were grappling to find the best way to move forward so that principals felt supported but not constrained by the central office. The leadership academies were one approach to balancing the tension inherent in
tightening the loosely coupled relationship in curriculum with principals. Bringing principals together at the academies to discuss their academic program with guidance and support from central office administrators could offer an ideal balance of flexibility and guidance. However, there were concerns by some that the efforts were not enough, and that the work would get even more complicated. As Superintendent Alonso expressed, “The Common Core is not going to be about schools defining what the standards are. Where we had loosened the conversation about school practice, now we needed a structural element that was going to tighten the conversation about standards and really provide support.”

Summary

Baltimore and Montgomery County took two very different approaches to managing the central office-school relationship in the functions of budgeting, staffing, and academic programming. Baltimore, for the most part, decentralized decisions, giving principals more control over the functions. Montgomery County had a more centralized approach; many decisions rested with administrators in the central office. Whether these approaches generated their intended outcomes—loose coupling or tight coupling—seemed to be dependent on the capacities of principals and principals’ perceptions of the capacity of the central office to meet their needs. When principals felt they did not have the skills to take control over certain decisions, they turned to the central office for guidance and direction. If they perceived the central office as responding effectively to their needs, a more tightly coupled relationship emerged. However, if principals did not feel that the central office met their needs, principals were likely to develop their own approaches, leading to a loosely coupled relationship. In other cases, such as teacher
hiring, principals’ capacities may align with increased control over decision making. This resulted in a more loosely coupled relationship. In all of these examples, the coupling outcome developed over time through interactions between principals and central office staff. Importantly, the coupling was dynamic and in a state of constant flux.
Chapter 7: Discussion and Implications

Some scholars note the importance of the central office in transforming instruction in classrooms (e.g. Honig, 2008); others argue that the best school systems are the ones with bare-bones central offices (Ouchi, 2006, 2009). Yet, relatively few researchers have looked at what happens when the central office interacts with schools, focusing instead on either the central office or the school level (Louis, 2008). What takes place in that negotiation and exchange between adults in schools and those in the central office? The challenge in examining that interplay is that the human dimension of organizations is complex and dynamic, particularly in large school districts.

Loose coupling theory (LCT) is a useful tool for examining that complexity. In LCT, the relationship between the central office and schools is dynamic, rather than static, and loose and tight coupling exist simultaneously (Orton & Weick, 1990; Spillane & Burch, 2003; Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008). By using LCT to examine the central office-schools relationships in Baltimore and Montgomery County I was able to generate more subtle and intricate descriptions of the organizational behavior of school districts. For example, with LCT I was able to uncover some of the underlying reasons why approaches to centralize or decentralize decision-making do not produce their intended outcomes of loose and tight coupling.

In this chapter, I first discuss three key patterns emerging from my study of central office-school relationships in Baltimore and Montgomery County. These shed light on some long-standing questions in the management of school districts: Which approach is more effective, centralization or decentralization? What functions should be under the control of principals? What functions should the central office control? In the
second main section of the chapter, I discuss the implications for research, practice, and policy.

**Approach and Capacity Determine Loose or Tight Coupling**

Whether decisions in these functions are centralized or decentralized, it is essential to understand the capacities of the central office and principals. Decentralizing decisions might improve student outcomes under some conditions as Ouchi (2006, 2009) and others argue, but only if principals have the capacity—ability, power, experience, and understanding—to carry out the required work. If principals feel they do not have that capacity, they will turn to the central office or elsewhere for guidance, which may lead to unintentional (and unpredictable) results.

Principals in Baltimore and Montgomery County interacted with the central office about three essential functions: budgeting, staffing, and academic programming. In Baltimore, the approach to managing the central office-school relationship in these functions was to decentralize decisions. Principals had considerable decision-making authority in the three functions. Montgomery County’s approach was more centralized. But, it was not the overall approach—decentralized or centralized—that seemed to matter most. Instead, it was whether the approach reinforced or aligned with the capacities of the central office and principals. That is, the link between approach (centralization and decentralization) and outcome (loose coupling and tight coupling) appeared to be shaped by the capacities of the central office and principals. When the central office augmented principals’ capacity in the functions, the approaches appeared to work well. However, in cases where principals believed that the central office did not have the capacity to
respond effectively, principals devised workarounds or simply did not meet the needs of their teachers and students.

The central offices in Baltimore and Montgomery County provided different levels of guidance and direction. But, from the perspective of principals, both central offices were at least minimally responsive to principals in the three functions of budgeting, staffing, and academic programming. For example, in Baltimore principals maintained control over much of their budgets. Yet, they still relied on the central office for support in this function. The budgeting specialist in the support network provided principals tools for budgeting and helped facilitate requisitions and payment requests through bureaucratic processes. In Montgomery County, most principals had very little control over their budgets. But, because principals of Title I schools did have some flexibility on how to use those additional funds, the central office provided these principals budgeting support. Additionally, principals felt that through their union’s representation on the budget committee, the budgeting process incorporated their feedback.

In these two examples, we can see how the approach each district took appeared to meet school’s and the principal’s needs. That is, Baltimore principals could seek individualized budgeting advice from their support network to address their school’s unique needs. In Montgomery County, the budgeting process differentiated resources to higher need Title I schools and reflected the feedback of principals via input from the MCAAP leaders. This level of responsiveness from the central office could also be seen in the function of academic programming. In Montgomery County, principals acknowledged that implementing the Common Core State Standards was complex and
demanding work. Indeed, more than one principal said they did not envy the work that needed to be done by the central office in revamping the curriculum, particularly in math. From the principals’ perspectives, they did not have the capacity to implement the new standards on their own, and they were more than happy that the central office provided that support. This is illustrated by one typical statement of a principal, “I love the support we get from the central office in curriculum.”

There was a similar perspective on academic programming from principals in Baltimore. Principals acknowledged that they needed greater support in curriculum, particularly in addressing the demands of the Common Core State Standards. For their part, central office administrators agreed and were ramping up guidance and technical assistance. Nearly all principals in Baltimore appreciated the increased support, praising the leadership academies and the help of their curriculum directors in the network. At the same time, they acknowledged that they would need even greater support to fully implement the Common Core. Again, we see in these two examples how the central office responded in academic programming to fit the needs of principals. Principals felt they needed enhanced capacity in budgeting and curriculum, and the central office provided that capacity through differentiated structures. But, there were also instances when the network did not enhance the capacity of principals in a function. And when this happened, principals were forced to build their own capacity to carry out the function. This can be seen in the example of teacher recruitment in Baltimore.

In Baltimore, the central office and the support network attempted to provide principals with a centralized system for teacher recruitment. However, as described in the previous chapter, nearly all principals interviewed did not find the candidate lists
provided by the central office to be helpful. From the perspective of principals, it was as if the central office provided no support at all for teacher recruitment. The centralized system for teacher recruitment was not seen as useful by principals, so it might as well not have existed.

In summary, the central office must meet the needs of principals in the three functions of budgeting, staffing, and academic programming. The key was not about whether the two districts leaned towards centralization or decentralization, but whether principals believed the central office had the capacity to meet their needs. When systems designed to provide centralized support didn’t work, principals defaulted to workarounds that resulted in greater decentralization. Similarly, when structures were set up to enhance decentralization and autonomy, but principals had no capacity, they demanded more support from the central office. When principals had the capacity within a decentralized approach for a particular function, the result was often loose coupling. If they did not have the capacity, then principals asked the central office for more guidance, producing tighter coupling in that function. Similarly, if the central office had the capacity in a function and used a centralized approach, then tight coupling predictably emerged. However, if the central office did not have the capacity but insisted on a centralized approach, the outcome was likely loose coupling.

**Tight or Loose Coupling Emerge Over Time through Interactions**

The outcome of tight or loose coupling is the result of interactions between principals and the central office over time, and is influenced by the capacity of principals and their perception of the capacity of the central office. Tighter coupling often resulted when principals viewed the central office as having the capacity to respond to their needs.
Loose coupling could emerge from several sources. If the central office decentralized decisions and principals had the skills and experiences to carry out those decisions, loose coupling was likely to emerge as it did with the teacher hiring process in Baltimore and Montgomery County. Loose coupling could also be the result of principals devising workarounds to centralized functions because they did not perceive the central office as meeting their needs, as was the case with teacher recruitment in Baltimore. Loose coupling also appeared to be influenced by principals’ capacity to negotiate with central office staff. In both Baltimore and Montgomery County, some principals were able to gain more autonomy in teacher placement by effectively arguing with the central office that placements would hurt their schools. The result was a slightly more loosely coupled relationship with the central office in teacher placement.

By applying LCT to examine the interactions between principals and the central office in Baltimore and Montgomery County, we get a more nuanced understanding of how tight or loose coupling emerge. I find that tight and loose coupling are the result of dynamic human interaction, and emerge over time as principals interact with administrators and staff from the central office. For example, the tight coupling between principals and the central office in Montgomery County in the functions of budgeting and staffing was the result of an ongoing dialogue between central office administrators and representative leaders from the three employees’ unions. Joint district-union committees, such as the ADC and budgeting committee, reached consensus on how practices would be standardized across the district. Then, those joint decisions were implemented, generating the tightly coupled relationship in Montgomery County. Principals felt that they had opportunities to provide feedback on how the tightly coupled relationship was
designed, and they felt that input was respected and incorporated. So, although, the outcome was tight coupling across schools in how staffing units were allocated, it was driven by interactions with the central office that integrated the perspectives and needs of principals.

Similarly, the loose coupling relationship in Baltimore around curriculum was beginning to become more tightly coupled as principals asked for more support from the central office. The support network and leadership academy systems were designed to support a loosely coupled relationship with principals in the function of curriculum. But, as principals found more value in the curriculum directors and monthly meetings, they asked for more guidance and support from the central office. Paradoxically, the systems in curriculum were designed to produce loose coupling, but the interactions between principals and central office staff were beginning to produce tighter coupling.

A similar pattern with the opposite outcome occurred in teacher recruitment in Baltimore. The district’s centralized system was designed to produce tight coupling in how principal’s recruited candidates. However, in their interactions with the central office around recruitment, principals found their needs in the area unmet. So, they designed their own recruitment strategies, which varied school to school. The result was loose coupling in teacher recruitment. The interactions between principals and central office in teacher recruitment in Baltimore generated loose coupling, even though the system itself was designed for the converse.

These examples lead to some generalizations about how tight and loose coupling might emerge as principals interact with the central office. As principals interact with the central office in the three functions, they are assessing whether their exchanges are
productive and useful, or ineffective and potentially harmful. Each principal’s assessment is going to depend on his or her own experiences, skills, beliefs, and unique school needs. If principals generally judge their interactions with the central office to be helpful, it seems reasonable to assume that they would be more willing to follow the direction and guidance provided. This, in turn, would generate tighter coupling.

**The Flux of Loose and Tight Coupling**

The outcome—whether loose or tight coupling—of the relationship between principals and the central office is exceptionally dynamic. Principals interacting in what appear to be very tightly coupled relationships with the central office still have some degree of flexibility. They often exercise that flexibility or autonomy to make decisions that fit the needs of their schools. Although it’s clear that the relationship between the central office and principals is dynamic, what is really quite surprising is just how much things change. It would be difficult to conclude that any approach that a district takes will consistently produce the same outcome of loose or tight coupling over time. The examples from teacher hiring and academic programming illustrate this point.

In both Baltimore and Montgomery County, principals had significant control or autonomy over whom they hired to teach in their schools. For the most part, they exercised that control over hiring and a loosely coupled relationship emerged. But even that loosely coupled relationship changed depending on the number and type of teacher layoffs. During periods of significant budget cuts or reductions in enrollment, the number of teacher layoffs increased. Displaced tenured teachers were then placed into open positions. Principals’ loosely coupled relationship with the central office around teacher hiring would then become more tightly coupled.
The flux of tight and loose coupling could also be seen in the implementation of the Common Core State Standards in Baltimore and Montgomery County. As the districts attempted to incorporate the standards into their curricula, the coupling shifted in both Baltimore and Montgomery County. But, the shifts were in different directions. In Baltimore, the relationship between principals and the central office around the academic program became more tightly coupled. In Montgomery County that relationship became more loosely coupled. One might expect that as other policies and reforms are implemented, there would be corresponding fluctuations in the coupling between principals and the central office.

**Implications for Research**

This application of loose coupling theory (LCT) to the study of central office-school relationships encourages new approaches to studying the complexity of school districts. The relationship between the central office and schools is complex and dynamic. LCT generates new directions in district-level research by focusing on the connecting points between the central office and schools, examining how elements at each level are coupled, and attending to the outcomes of those couplings. It moves discussions about centralization and decentralization to more complex interpretations that account for the multiple and dynamic interactions between schools and central offices.

From this application, there are several important considerations for future studies. First, it is important that researchers clearly define the specific elements being studied at the central office- and school-levels. Second, there is clearly a need to examine the linkages between approach, coupling outcome, organizational performance, and student outcomes. There are many open questions about whether alignment of
approach and coupling—centralization and tight coupling, for example—enhances organizational performance and thus student outcomes. A related line of potential research would be to explore the effect of conflicting central office-school perspectives. What happens when principals and the central office disagree about who has the capacity to carry out work in a particular function? Finally, this study calls for an expanded interpretation of loose coupling theory that clearly distinguishes between intention and outcome when examining the elements of a coupled system. In the next sections, I discuss each of these implications for research in more detail.

**Defining the connecting points between the central office and schools.** The connection between principals and the central office is relatively straightforward because it involves only one person at the school level. At the same time, principals might interact with the central office on teams or committees that further complicate the dynamic of the central office-school relationship. Future studies might explore how principals interact with the central office as individuals, on teams or through informal connections, such as community gatherings and social friend groups. An expanded and clear definition of elements also aids in analyzing the coupling process. In this way, research can focus on the patterns that emerge from different interactions between principals and the central office. For example, it could be fruitful to explore how being involved on a team that interacts with the central office affects the coupling outcome.

A related potential line of research might examine the environmental factors that influence the connections between specific individuals, teams, or departments at central office and schools. As Weick (1976) initially proposed, systems may develop loose coupling between elements in response to their external environment. Meyer and Rowan
(1978) built on that claim when they argued that schools create “ceremonial conformity” around teacher and student classifications to address environmental pressures for accountability, efficiency, and performance (p. 341). Subsequent studies demonstrated links between an organization’s strategy, environment, and performance showing that different environments required different patterns of coupling for high performance (Horwitch & Thietart, 1987). There is no doubt that public education deals with an incredibly complex environment. But, that environment must be analyzed in order to understand how the work between central offices and schools is carried out. The historical, political, legal, social, and cultural contexts of a school system affect the interactions between people and teams in schools and their peers in the central office. Clearly, principals, assistant principals, and school leadership teams play an important role in the process. Getting a more accurate picture of the central office-school relationship will require understanding how these factors shape interactions in school systems. Taken together, applying LCT to the study of central office-school relationships will require research methodology suited to exploring a new application of theory to practice. Methodologies that integrate multiple sources of data into inductive designs may be appropriate.

The linkages between approach, coupling, and performance. If a school system is intentional about taking a centralized approach in a particular function and the result is little variability across schools (i.e. tight coupling), then is the result improved organizational performance and student outcomes? Similarly, if a district takes a decentralized approach and loose coupling emerges, then will schools and the central office operate more effectively and produce better student performance? These are
questions for which many an educational leader wants answers. The challenge for researchers in designing a study to address these questions is twofold.

First, the study must be focused enough to examine specific interactions between the central office and schools and their effect on organizational performance and student outcomes. This likely requires examining the central office-school relationship in one particular function, with academic programming being the most compelling choice. But, even narrowing in on academic programming is not sufficient. Researchers would likely have to examine central office-school interactions in a particular subject (e.g. math, science, language arts) and school level (e.g. elementary, middle, or high school) in order to understand how those interactions shape organizational capacity and student learning. For example, a potential future study might examine the effect on organizational performance and student learning when a centralized approach to early elementary literacy produces tight coupling.

The second major challenge is that the study must not be so focused and specific that it generates few useful findings. Addressing this challenge means selecting multiple sites that take different approaches in a particular function. Using the same example of early elementary literacy, researchers would want to include a mix of sites, some that use a centralized approach and others that are more decentralized. A working hypothesis for such a study might be that sites where the approach and coupling outcome align have greater organizational performance and better student outcomes than those sites where the approach and outcome contradict.

In short, there are two opposing forces that complicate designing a study that examines the linkages between organizational behavior and performance in school
systems. On one hand, the study needs to be focused enough to identify the link between specific interactions and student outcomes. On the other, the study cannot be so narrow that it only generates insights for a district and schools operating within one particular context at a specific point in time.

**The effect of conflicting central office-school perspectives.** A somewhat related line of research could explore the phenomenon of conflict between the central office and schools. This study looked specifically at how principals described and perceived their relationship with the central office. In this way, it really only captured one perspective of a many-party relationship. It would have been interesting to contrast multiple perspectives of the central office-school relationship. We know from prior research and practical knowledge that tensions exist between the priorities of administrators in the central office and those in the schools (Steinberg, 2014; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). However, we know little about how those tensions or conflicts shape the capacity of central office administrators and school leaders to carry out their work. One might imagine that constructive conflict between the central office and schools is necessary and enhances productivity. Future studies might explore the threshold for when conflict between the central office and schools becomes unproductive.

For example, one design for a study might be to interview the principals at the school level and the specific individuals they interact with at the central office. By asking similar questions about the perceived relationships with the other party, it would be possible to see how their perspectives differ or align. Of particular interest would be uncovering and examining patterns of misaligned perceptions, and whether they affect capacity in schools and the central office to carry out work.
Expanding the constructive interpretation of loose coupling theory. One of the main criticisms of Weick’s work on loose coupling is that the language used to describe the concept is abstruse and nebulous. Weick acknowledges these criticisms in saying that these “underspecifications and the contradictions…may seem like social science run amok” (Orton & Weick, 1990, p. 203). However, subsequent research seems to have done little to clarify and operationalize loose coupling theory (LCT). My study shows how LCT can uncover why some approaches to managing the central office-school relationship work as intended and others do not. In doing so, it makes LCT accessible and practicable for researchers by distinguishing between the coupling process and outcome, and the approach a district takes in managing schools. Researchers can use this enhanced understanding of LCT to understand organizations beyond school districts. Indeed, LCT could help us better understand the behavior and performance of any multi-unit organization that faces choices between centralization and decentralization.

Implications for Practice and Policy

By examining the central office-school relationships in Baltimore and Montgomery County, we also gain an improved understanding of how to improve the organizational effectiveness of large school systems. Findings from the research could inform how different managerial approaches shape practices and outcomes across schools. More generally, my findings require that educators and policymakers change their thinking and conversations about how organizational approaches—centralization and decentralization—affect organizational performance and student outcomes. The approach a district takes is guided by hypothesis or theory about how improvement occurs; it is not the outcome. By confounding the approach and outcome, educators and
policy makers misunderstand why some reforms work as intended and others do not. They miss the conditions under which an approach leads to the intended outcome—tight or loose coupling. This study not only identifies some of these conditions, but it also disentangles the approach a district takes from the coupling outcome. As a result, my study has several important implications for educators and policy makers.

First, my study offers an improved understanding of how to intentionally manage school systems in order to achieve selected organizational outcomes. For example, a school district serving diverse communities and facing significant budget cuts may want to decentralize decisions in budgeting with the idea that principals need more flexibility to meet the unique needs of their local schools. Doing so calls for the close examination of the capacities of principals and the central office, and assessment of whether those capacities align with the intended approach. A second major implication for my study addresses how administrators decide to sequence the elements of complex reforms. Complex reforms that rely on the expertise of principals and teachers to implement may be better suited to decentralized approaches that give schools flexibility. At the same time, if that expertise does not exist, the sequencing of the reform must take into account preliminary capacity-building efforts. Finally, my study has a clear message for senior educational leaders and policy makers who adhere to one particular ideological approach. Centralization and decentralization are very crude hammers and few problems in education are as straightforward as an exposed nail that needs pounding. Advocating for one approach over another without close examination of the context and capacities of the district is misguided at best and damaging for children at worst. In the following sections, I describe in greater detail these implications for practice and policy.
The importance of aligning approach and capacities. My study implies that it is critical to match the approach a district takes with the capacities of those—in the central office and in schools—who carry out the work. For example, in Montgomery County, the district had a tightly coupled relationship in budgeting for most principals. Therefore, the successful principal in Montgomery County did not necessarily need strong budgeting skills, with one exception. Principals at Title I schools did have extra budgeting responsibility. So, it would make sense for candidates of an open position as principal at a Title I school to have experience crafting and keeping track of a school budget.

One implication for practice here is that districts must have methods to assess the skills, experiences, and understandings of principals. A way to do this is to ask or survey principals. But, this cost-effective and efficient approach does have drawbacks typical of self-report assessments. Principals may not be able to reliably assess their own skills. As an alternative, districts might consider using online or in-person assessments. Although more expensive and time-consuming, they would provide a better appraisal of the individual and collective capacities of principals in the district.

Similarly, the district must also understand the capacity of the central office, or more importantly, the perception principals have of that capacity. District leaders might move to centralize a particular decision with the belief that the central office has the capacity to respond to principals needs in that function. However, if principals themselves do not have that same perception, the move to centralization is unlikely to produce its intended outcome. To prevent such confusion, it behooves district leaders to have principals advising them on their perception of the capacity of the central office.
There need to be pathways for honest and clear communication from principals to district leaders about whether the central office is meeting their needs. Furthermore, the central office should take into account that feedback when making subsequent decisions. There are a number of examples of this feedback process working effectively in Montgomery County. Principals participated on a curriculum advisory committee that provided direct feedback to senior central office administrators. Their representatives also sat on the joint budgeting committee and provided input on how resources were allocated in the district.

The notion that the district’s approach is aligned with the skills and experiences of those in the central office and schools also has implications for the leadership development programs in school districts. Given that most principals come from the AP ranks, it is appropriate for districts to make those positions training grounds for the skills and capacities excellent principals need. Districts should consider identifying the capacities of their successful principals, and then incorporating learning experiences into the AP role that develop those capacities. For example, in Baltimore, it was important for the leadership pipeline to ensure that principal candidates knew how to use their budgets effectively. The assistant principal role could be an area of focus for development programs.

**Nature and sequencing of reforms.** My findings have clear implications for how district leaders implement reforms. When implementing a new reform, district leaders must ask themselves the question, “Where does the greatest capacity to carry out this work exist—in schools or at the central office?” If the capacity is at the schools, then it might make sense to take a more decentralized approach in implementation. On the
other hand, if the central office has the capacity, then it might make sense to take a more centralized approach (as long as that capacity doesn’t rest in a single individual). Yet, how does one go about assessing the capacity of schools or the central office to implement a particular reform? One way is to simply engage with and ask leaders themselves in schools and the central office. Baltimore accomplished this through its leadership academies when implementing the Common Core State Standards. In the monthly meetings, principals and central office staff engaged in discussions about the implementation of a major reform. The joint district-union committees in Montgomery County served a similar purpose. Without the input of school-level leaders in the implementation process, it will be almost impossible to assess who is best positioned and able to do the work.

Another important aspect to consider is whether the nature of the reform lends itself well to one approach or another. If the reform involves complex and uncertain activities that principals and teachers must interpret in order to implement, then it would be difficult for a district to take a centralized approach in implementation. In order to do so, the central office would have to build up the necessary knowledge and skills required of the reform, and then move towards a centralized approach. The implementation of the Common Core State Standards in Baltimore and Montgomery County provide an excellent example of how the nature of the reform interacts with the approach a district takes and the capacities of principals and the central office. According to principals and central office administrators in both districts, the Common Core involved complex and significant changes to instructional practice in schools. In the decentralized context of
Baltimore, principals found the limited central office guidance helpful and asked for more.

In Montgomery County, where the district had traditionally taken a centralized approach to curricular reform, principals found the relative lack of direction from the central office around the Common Core frustrating. Indeed, the principals had grown to expect the central office to take the lead in interpreting and implementing complex reforms, such as the Common Core. When this did not happen, some voiced their dissatisfaction. Indeed, Superintendent Josh Starr was forced to resign in the spring of 2015 and one of the reasons cited was the perceived mishandling of the implementation of the Common Core (George & Turque, 2015).

**Reframing the debate about centralization and decentralization.** To centralize or decentralize is a managerial decision, much like hiring, promotion, or dismissal. It should be based on close examination of the knowledge, skills, and past performance of the people involved—at the central office and schools—in the work that needs to be done. A manager would be considered foolish (and likely lose his or her own job) if a decision was made to hire someone without examining the candidate’s qualifications or expertise. So, it should be the same when making decisions to centralize or decentralize in a school system. Educational leaders, researchers, and policymakers whom advocate for one approach over another without examining the particulars should also be considered fools of the sector.

Uninformed implementation of a particular ideology means allowing reforms intended to improve student learning to be settled by chance. The lives and futures of students should not be left to such accidental possibility. To do so, the debate over
centralization and decentralization must be reframed as a discussion about what works best, given the context and capacities of a district.

**Limitations of the Study and LCT**

The relationship between the central office and schools is complex and dynamic. I’ve focused here on how principals perceived that relationship, and under what conditions those interactions led to loose or tight coupling. But, as the principals described, the school’s interactions with the central office extended far beyond the school leader. One key limitation to this study is that I have focused broadly on three shared functions between principals and the central office. This focus inherently limits extending my findings to other equally important, but unaddressed, aspects of the central office-school relationship.

For example, teachers in both districts interact with the central office in many ways, through induction programs, professional development, and via emails and memos from central office personnel. Support staff also have numerous interactions with the central office of a school district, many of which drive the schedule and other important aspects of students’ experiences in school. Furthermore, I have only studied two districts within one state, which has unique characteristics. Maryland is a strongly Democratic state and many of its educational policies reflect that political party’s agenda. It is unclear whether my findings would hold true for large districts in different states with significantly different political contexts.

Another key limitation of the study involves the chosen research methodology. Although comparative case studies allow closer inspection of the complex relationships between central offices and schools, they have limitations. It would be impossible to
analyze all the relationships between principals and the central office in comparative case studies of Baltimore and Montgomery County. Even if this study could define all relationships, the practical relevance of such a study is questionable. A comprehensive description of the complexity of central office-school relationships would merely reinforce what many researchers and practitioners already know—central offices and schools interact in complicated ways. The main challenge is treating the particulars with respect, while also seeking to illuminate the broad patterns of relationships in an organization or system.

Applying any theory to study central office-school relationships also involves tradeoffs. Some theories illuminate certain features of organizations and obscure others. Along these lines, LCT has several limitations. First, an assessment of loose or tight coupling between elements in an organization depends on how one defines and examines the coupled elements and their context. The relationship between a principal and a human resource staff person around the task of hiring may broadly reflect loose-coupling. That same relationship, however, may be tightly coupled on dismissals. Consequently, researchers using LCT may come to different conclusions, even when seemingly studying the same coupled elements.

A third limitation is that LCT is not always helpful in uncovering assumptions about the goals of an organization. The application of LCT to educational organizations often implies that the key activity of schools is instruction with the goal of improving individual learning. However, schools serve other functions in society—cultural promotion, social reproduction—which an application of LCT may miss.
Finally, LCT simplifies the social organization of power in school systems (Ingersoll, 1993). By focusing on the interaction between discrete elements in an organization as I have done here, LCT sometimes neglects the social context in which each element exists. Principals do not simply interact with a human resource staff person and then make a decision. Their decisions are heavily influenced by students, teachers, the local community, and a range of other factors. Consequently, similar approaches to coupling in very different social contexts may produce vastly different outcomes.

**Conclusion**

The ability of school systems to intentionally enact loose couplings between some elements and tight couplings between others is key to improving organizational effectiveness, advancing equity, and responding effectively to dynamic political and social contexts. School system leaders wanting to strategically manage central office-school relations must understand how principals’ interactions with the central office shape loose and tight coupling. Uninformed efforts to tighten or loosen the relationships between the central office and schools will ultimately lead to unintended results and inconsistent performance.

As schools face powerful demands to improve, their relationship is more interdependent with the central office than in the past. The well-known 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, signaled the beginning of this shift in the interaction between schools and central offices (National Commission on the Excellence in Education, 1983). The federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 codified many of its recommendations by requiring states to assess student achievement in reading and math, and by holding schools and districts accountable for improvement. From school- and classroom-level research, there
is strong evidence that NCLB reforms influence instructional practice and redirect school resources (Booher-Jennings, 2006; Diamond & Spillane, 2004). But, the effectiveness of the reforms has been mixed; progress in improving student achievement performance has been slow.

Policymakers and educational leaders should consider how reforms intended to improve student performance will be implemented at the intersection of central offices and schools. School districts are very likely to implement reform efforts with strong sanctions and accountability measures, such as NCLB, using centralized approaches. In the cases where the central office has the capacity (or at least principals believe that it does) to implement reforms, the consequence might be greater consistency in practices across schools. However, when central office cannot respond to principals’ needs, as is the case in many large urban school districts, the result is often loose coupling, uneven implementation, and organizational ineffectiveness.

I hope this study can shape the debate by identifying some of the underlying conditions necessary for productive interactions between central office and schools. Indeed, if the relationship between the central office and schools in large urban school districts remains a mystery, it will be difficult to know whether the outcomes in schools were the result of intentional action or chance.
Appendix A: Site characteristics

**Baltimore City Schools**

**School Year 2013-2014**

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<table>
<thead>
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<tr>
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<td>Number of schools</td>
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**Student racial and ethnic categories**

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<td>White</td>
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**Percent students scoring proficient**

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<th>Grade and Subject</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>53%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade 4 Reading</td>
<td>68%</td>
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<td>Grade 8 Math</td>
<td>29%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade 8 Reading</td>
<td>55%</td>
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**Montgomery County Public Schools**

**School Year 2013-2014**

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<td>Total enrollment for district</td>
<td>151,295</td>
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<td>Number of schools</td>
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**Student racial and ethnic categories**

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<td>Asian</td>
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<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td>White</td>
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**Percent students scoring proficient**

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<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Grade 4 Math</td>
<td>80%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade 4 Reading</td>
<td>89%</td>
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<td>Grade 8 Math</td>
<td>69%</td>
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<td>Grade 8 Reading</td>
<td>84%</td>
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Appendix B: Participant characteristics

### Baltimore City Schools

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name/Pseudonym*</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>School Level</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>State Rank</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrés Alonzo</td>
<td>CEO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonia Brookins-Santelises</td>
<td>Chief Academic Officer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Jonathan Brice</td>
<td>Chief Networks Officer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny Jefferson</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eileen McFarland</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lonnie Harrison</td>
<td>Network Facilitator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna Shiney</td>
<td>Network Facilitator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrés Alonzo</td>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
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<td>373 of 833</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Elementary</td>
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<td>Network Facilitator</td>
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<td>Debrah Shannon</td>
<td>Principal</td>
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### Montgomery County Public Schools

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<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>State Rank</th>
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*Pseudonyms were given to all participants in non-chief level positions (e.g. principals, executive directors, community superintendents, directors) as required by informed consent procedures*
Appendix C: Interview protocol for principals

1) How long have you been in this district?
2) What did you do prior to your current position?
3) Could you describe your district’s strategy?
4) How would you describe your relationship with central office?
5) If you think about school autonomy on a continuum, with high school autonomy on one end and low school autonomy on the other, where would you put your school?
   a) Are there certain areas where your school has more or less autonomy?
6) What do you rely on central office for?
7) How much control do you have over your school’s budget? What can you control?
   a) What role does central office play in your school’s budget?
   b) What aspects of the budget do you not have control over? Is it important to your job?
8) How much control do you have over staffing (typical year):
   a) What role does central office play in staffing?
   b) What aspects of staffing do you not have control over? Is it important to your job?
9) What decisions can you make about your school’s curriculum and instruction?
   a) What role does central office play in curriculum and instruction?
   b) What curriculum and instruction decisions do you not have control over? Are these important to your job?
10) How much control do you have over the management structures and the policies and practices of your school? What decisions do you not have control over? Are these important to your job?
11) What is important for us to know about the work of being a principal in ________ today?
12) Do you have any questions you’d like to ask us?
Appendix D: Interview protocol for central office leaders

1) How long have you been in this district?
2) What did you do prior to your current position?
3) Could you describe your district’s strategy?
4) Your schools all have different performance levels, capacity, communities, and demographics. How do you think about adapting your district’s strategy to these varying school needs? What are the advantages and disadvantages to this approach?
5) If you think about school autonomy on a continuum, with high school autonomy on one end and low school autonomy on the other, where would you put your district’s schools? Are there certain areas where schools have more or less autonomy? Can you give me an example?
6) What role does central office play in staffing, curriculum and instruction, budgeting?
7) How would you describe your relationship with principals?
8) How do you manage that relationship between central office and schools? Could you give an example of when there was tension between central office and school principals? How did you manage that tension?
9) How much control do you have over the management structures and the policies implemented in schools? What decisions do you not have control over? Are these important to your job?
10) Is there anything else we haven’t asked that you think is important for us to know about your district?
11) Do you have any questions you’d like to ask us?
## Appendix E: List of documents collected

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<td>How Four Districts Crafted Innovative Principal Evaluation Systems: Success Stories in Collaboration</td>
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## Appendix F: Codebook

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<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Specific explanations of holding others accountable or being held accountable; discussions of culture of accountability; references to expectations set by district leadership.</td>
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<td>Budgeting</td>
<td>Includes the budgeting process, how funds are allocated to specific departments or programs, references for supplies and materials, discussions of federal or state categorical funds, and mention of private donations.</td>
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<td>curriculum_instruction</td>
<td>Discussions of curriculum content (tools, resources, material, and texts), pacing (rate at which the standards and content are taught), standards (what a student should know and be able to do by a certain grade or age), and programs (supplemental math, literacy, or science programs). Also, content about instructional approach a teacher actually uses in the classroom.</td>
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<td>district_school relation</td>
<td>Descriptions of relationships and communication between district and schools; rather than specific decisions this code includes general discussions of relationships and communication pathways between district and schools; also general discussions of whether &quot;ask for permission or forgiveness&quot;</td>
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<td>loose_coupling</td>
<td>Examples of principals describing practices they carry out autonomously. Descriptions of how much flexibility principals say they have over functions.</td>
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<td>Responsive</td>
<td>Descriptions of connections to central office staff, committees, or other elements. Illustrations of negotiations and authorization conversations with central office staff.</td>
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<td>staffing_evaluation</td>
<td>Specific references to the process or instrument used for teacher evaluation; includes discussions of changes in teacher evaluation and how teachers react to evaluation.</td>
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<td>staffing_hiring+assignment</td>
<td>Descriptions of how teaching positions are allotted and filled including recruitment, screening, hiring, and placement processes; also discussions of difficulty filling positions.</td>
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<td>staffing_support</td>
<td>Informal and formal training to update the knowledge and skills of experienced and new teachers. Includes support provided by central office staff, outside consultants, professional learning communities, peers/mentors, coaches, and school-level leaders.</td>
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<td>Strategy</td>
<td>Descriptions of the district's espoused strategies or theories of change. Also, includes discussions of changes in strategy and comparisons with other districts' strategies.</td>
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<td>The process in which a district assigns students to schools and the consequences associated with the assignment process.</td>
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<td>Examples of principals describing practices they do not have control over. Descriptions from principals about the functions of key improvement work that they perceive as being controlled by central office.</td>
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Bibliography


Honig, M.I. (2013). *From tinkering to transformation: Strengthening school district...


Murphy, J. (1990). Principal instructional leadership. In R. S. Lotto & P. W. Thurston (Eds.), Advances in educational administration: Changing perspectives on the school (pp. 163-200). Greenwich, CT: JAI.


Vita

Geoff Eckman Marietta

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