

Principal Supervisors as Agents for Both
District-Wide Instructional Improvement and Central Office Cultural Change:
A Bifurcated Strategy

Doctor of Education Leadership (Ed.L.D.)
Capstone

Submitted by

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To the Harvard Graduate School of Education
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education Leadership.

April 2014

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For my Granny

Ivy Louise McKenzie

You were the first person I called with the news of my acceptance to Harvard. You were also the last person I called, for with tremendous pride you lovingly shouted the good news to the rest of the world. My accomplishments always gave you deep joy. This endeavor was a courageous leap of faith inspired by your strength, your courage, and your zest for life. I miss you dearly.

Acknowledgments

Thank you Jesus. All the glory belongs to you, for apart from you I can do nothing. Your word is my truth and my life and you have instructed me accordingly: *Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.* John 15 v 4

Thank you to my husband, Dr. James Philip Huguley. You are the love of my life. I am honored to bear your name, symbolic of the pride I feel in fully identifying myself with you, your character, and your spirit. Through this process you have been my partner, my companion, my best friend. Your unerring love and support gave me the strength to rise above self-doubt. Our journey together has only just begun, for “where you go, I will go, and where you live, I will live. Your people shall be my people and your God, my God.” I will love you always, babe.

Thank you to my mother, Rosita Del Carmen Martinez. Mom, you are my fierce prayer warrior, and when you go to God on my behalf, He listens and responds. I am eternally grateful for your prayers and for your unconditional love. You have been a true role model, and your passion and advocacy for the rights of children and for education equity now live in me.

Thank you to my father, Carleton R. N. McKenzie. Dad, you are an undeniable source of encouragement and strength in my life. Thank you for years of sacrificially giving of yourself to ensure that I received a good education. I learned my most fundamental leadership lessons from watching and listening to you over the last 39 years. I can see you in my work.

Thank you to my twin brother, Alister, and my sisters, Marlin, Cecile, and Ann. Your collective love, loyalty, and encouragement empower me to move in this world and to respond to God’s calling upon my life.

Thank you, Dr. Deborah Jewell-Sherman. I believe that God knows what we have need of and He knew I needed you to get me through this process. I personally benefit from your artful leadership, your masterful teaching, and your supportive friendship.

Thank you, Dr. Linda Lane. Your generosity and wisdom have supported my learning in unprecedented ways this year. I’m eternally grateful for the gift of access that you gave me—allowing me into the heart of the work in PPS. It has truly been an honor.

Thank you, Dr. Richard Weissbourd. Your focus and research interest on love was quiet apropos, given my new marriage in this season. Its timeliness also added a level of support to this work that I did not anticipate, and your insightful feedback on my work has pushed my thinking and supported my learning.

Thank you, Katherine Casey. As my esteemed peer coach, you have listened empathically and have been willing to process life with me on a deep level. I’m enriched by the learning we did together.

Thank you, C2, for the best lateral learning experience of my life. Special thanks to J-Cash: Hueling Lee, Sarah Johnson, Chip Linehan, and Justin May—J-Cash Forever! And also a special thanks to Gislaine Ngounou, Eva Mejia, Emma Heesch, and Lucia Moritz. The journey has been real!

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Abstract

Despite earnest efforts, most urban school districts have struggled to sustain district-wide racial equity in achievement outcomes. In response to such a plight in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, this capstone details the piloting of an initiative that uses a unique set of approaches at multiple levels and sees learning-focused partnerships between principals and their central office supervisors as a focal lever for district-wide improvement. At the principal level, the initiative involved installing a program of personal mastery and instructional leadership development, as well as assisting in the establishment of a community of practice among school leaders. Simultaneously, this project used informal authority strategically at the district level to challenge a compliance-based culture in the central office, with the goal of turning mindsets there toward becoming more of an adaptive learning organization focused on reflective continuous improvement. Assuming the roles of a principal supervisor, a member of the superintendent's executive cabinet, and a practice-based researcher, I explored the day-to-day opportunities and challenges of being a boundary-spanner, working across hierarchical levels of district and school leadership. Findings detail ways in which urban central offices can shift their approaches in supporting principals—from top-down, compliance-based models to more of a focus on the adaptive leadership skills needed for principals to learn and lead with greater discretion and empowerment. Simultaneously, principal supervisors can play a critical role in elevating key lessons and ideas from leaders in the field in ways that reciprocally influence policy and organizational structure at the district level. Findings also suggest, however, that to do so sustainably requires shifting the central office culture so that principal supervisors can also operate more freely and instinctively. In this regard, a more formally authoritative positioning is needed to address the stubborn and prohibitive elements of central office culture.

Introduction

In an effort to know more about school leaders' view of the Pittsburgh Public Schools' (PPS) culture and the effectiveness of the school district's central office, Superintendent Dr. Linda Lane boldly administered a "culture and effectiveness" survey in the spring of 2013. The survey asked principals and assistant principals to provide insight in areas related to how the central office supports their work. The survey results indicated extremely low morale and a lack of trust between the schools and central office staff. School leaders primarily reported poor and disjointed communication, poor teamwork, and an overall lack of confidence in the central office's effectiveness in supporting schools. What's worse, these findings came after a two-year period in which there were declines in student achievement, and a 10-year trend in declining enrollment across the Pittsburgh schools. In this context, the survey results elevated the need to find new ways to support principals in their development as instructional leaders and managers to a particularly high priority in PPS.

In response, over a period of eight months, Superintendent Lane met with every principal in the district in an effort to build relationships by connecting with them personally and hearing about their experiences firsthand. Through these meetings, Dr. Lane hoped to learn how the central office history, its everyday ways of operating, and the district's underlying policies and goals could be contributing to the problems the principals described. She also sought more effective ways to improve the district's responsiveness and enhance the services and supports principals received from the central office to help them improve teaching and learning in their schools. Her aim was also to do so in a way that did not feel compliance-driven and instead harnessed the principals'

uniquely situated expertise. In essence, the survey results gave the district a great opportunity for double-loop learning, a process through which leaders not only acknowledge that something is not working but also examine the assumptions and beliefs undergirding their practices, and then determine what to do about it (Argyis, 1976).

The superintendent and executive leadership team members were intentionally mindful in wanting to shift away from a command-and-control, top-down style of directing principals—an approach that in recent years had been used increasingly as a strategic choice to control quality and decrease variability in achievement across schools. This approach, which often characterizes American urban public school districts, has been said to signify a “culture of bureaucracy, the method the education system has employed to carry out its institutional mission” (Brown, 2004, p. 3). Yet in the face of so many complex problems (i.e., the principal survey results, academic decline, and the persistence of severe racial disparities in achievement), the district had been moving toward a more collaborative approach and partnering with schools in new ways. Through these efforts, the district aimed to empower teachers and support principals as instructional leaders, while simultaneously holding them accountable for improving achievement results for African American and White students alike.

The cultural challenges PPS faces are in many ways driven by the larger federal and state policy contexts. On the federal level, high-stakes accountability initiatives such as the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act increased federal and state demands on school districts, holding them more accountable for showing annual progress in improving achievement for all students, and for closing racial achievement gaps. On the state level, PPS adopted the Pennsylvania State Core Standards, a Common Core Standard

derivative, and the new, more rigorous assessments that are aligned with them. If nothing else, these local and federal policy shifts spurred many districts into unprecedented action.

In 2009, as part of the ongoing PPS reform efforts, the district was selected to join a major foundation-funded national network of school districts and charter management organizations that had undertaken efforts to improve effective teaching through the development and implementation of a robust teacher development and evaluation system. The program was designed to improve student achievement and get students ready for college by ensuring that each student had a highly effective teacher who was delivering the highest possible quality instruction.

In this unprecedented phase of PPS' history, for which the district was nationally recognized as a leader of education reform, its laser-like focus was on supporting teacher effectiveness, evaluation, and accountability. It can be argued that in the last four years the district has shifted a large portion of its strategy from principals to teachers as the main lever for improving student achievement.¹ Consequently, relatively less attention was paid to the leadership and supervision in the school contexts in which they worked, and as the teacher evaluation work progressed across districts, it became clear that PPS would have to balance this focus with a return to its past priority of principal leadership, thus allowing principals to play a more substantive role in the instructional improvement effort. These district partners came to realize that including principals was a key to the sustainability of the teacher effectiveness work. This realization relates to what Elmore

¹ In 2007, PPS placed its bets on principals and initiated the Pittsburgh Urban Leadership System for Excellence (PULSE), a program to recruit and train principals. Funded through a \$7.4 million grant, it was a very expensive program. Since the money ran out, less attention has been paid to the principal pipeline, training, and support (CGCS, 2010).

(2011) describes as “leaders of learning.” This is a conception of instructional leadership whereby principals are called to have the skills of a master teacher and coach, and also to be leaders of learning who are “skilled in observing, analyzing, and understanding teaching and learning . . . coupled with skills of decision making about how to manage and support the learning enterprises” in their schools (p. 1).

Consequently, assistant superintendents, who in PPS are the primary frontline central office leaders who are called to support and supervise principals, were also being called to a higher level of instructional leadership and management. They were leaders of leaders, who in turn had to use their instructional, organizational, and managerial knowledge to support principals in cultivating the conditions under which children and adults in their schools could learn. This meant being able to grow and shape the principalship in unprecedented ways—an adaptive challenge that had no clear or easy answers (Heifitz, 2002). It also meant that continuous cycles of double-loop learning had to take place within a particularly sensitive ecosystem that was facing issues of mistrust, initiative fatigue, and cynicism.

Much of an organization’s success can be attributed to its culture (Heskett, 2012), and the issues with principal support that PPS was facing challenged the entire central office as an organization—in particular the Office of School Performance—to rethink the ways principals were being supported, and to respond by seeking different avenues to understanding the principals’ perspectives. As a key step in this effort, Dr. Lane later added, “developing a student-focused culture” as one of the district goals, and she shifted her strategy to “investing in people, structures and culture” (Whole Child, Whole Community plan, 2013). Brown (2004) writes, however, that when a district wants a

different and/or better organizational culture in its schools and central office, “we are asking that the people caught up in this complex, highly compromised environment somehow develop a set of values, beliefs, stories, and means of operating that will transcend all these other influences and tensions and focus everyone more on the central task of learning” (p. 3). Put more plainly, the challenges of cultural change are large. Nevertheless, Dr. Lane’s goals and plans for a reconceptualization of principal support provided evidence that the central office was committed to the district’s challenging journey. This cultural shift, which was represented by changing the district’s approach to interacting with principals and schools, was the catalyst for my strategic project.

As part of a larger body of work, I was tasked with piloting a principal support initiative in which I was allowed to deviate from the conventional regulatory district principal support structure. I invited seven PPS principals into this partnership to engage in a dual-focused journey that involved developing adaptive leadership skills and strengthening their instructional leadership. I hold that effective principal leadership must include a deliberate practice of self-reflection and personal mastery, or “inner work,” as well as the continuous instructional leadership development needed to navigate the political terrain of what principals see as a compliance-based bureaucratic school district (Kegan 2014; Wagner & Kegan, 2006). The initiative was designed to document my learning systematically through this embedded practice so that it could be scaled more broadly for future district-wide improvement, and for use in other districts seeking a similar cultural shift. As detailed below, this combination of practices at the principal level was designed and integrated according to current research and practice as described in the literature, the systems-level change strategies I have learned in the EdLD program,

and my 14 years of experience as a teacher and then a principal in the New York City public schools.

Both the research and my experience as a practitioner suggested that, to achieve scalability and sustainability in these efforts to improve instructional leadership, the PPS central office culture would have to be transformed as well (Fullan, 2006; Honig, 2012). Thus, this project employed a bifurcated strategy, whereby I provided direct support to principals while I also sought to leverage my unique position as a “boundary-spanner.” I worked between schools and as a member of the central office executive cabinet to employ strategies, even informally, that might have the potential to catalyze a culture of continuous organizational learning at the central office (Honig, 2006).

Understanding that, at its most fundamental level, culture is rooted in relationships (Brown, 2004; Fullan, 2001), I worked purposefully and cross functionally in the central office to build trusting relationships with key district leaders and to increase my connection with executive directors across the entire organization. These relationships opened doors for me to informally, yet strategically, begin to engage in modest ways in this cultural work with the executive cabinet. Ultimately, by employing this bifurcated strategy, I hoped that my learning at both the school level and the central office level would enable district leaders to identify conditions that either helped or hindered these much needed cultural and practical shifts.

For the broader field, by examining this attempt to do transformative work in the Pittsburgh Public Schools through the day-to-day practice of my own instructional leadership and management, and that of seven principals, this project aims to contribute to (1) the growing knowledge about what instructional leaders at the school level and

central office generally do, and a richer understanding of the hows, whys, and whens of the conditions, opportunities, experiences, tools, and scaffolds that can be provided by district central office leaders in their efforts to optimally support principals; and (2) the documentation of the way such shifts in mindset occur both among principals and in the central office culture in order to inform the best practices in employing such new approaches for the benefit of the many other compliance-driven urban district cultures.

This capstone project proceeds as follows. In Part 1, after highlighting some of the relevant contextual factors in PPS, I review the current literature regarding the rationale and empirical support for the strategic actions I took in my project, culminating in the theory of action that has guided the work. Next I present the results of this project at the principal and district levels, followed by an analysis of the factors that facilitated the results, as informed by Moore's (1997) strategic triangle. Finally, I share the implications of this study across three ecological levels—for the PPS site, for the sector more broadly, and for myself.

Review of Knowledge for Action

The actions I have taken throughout this capstone project have been rooted in three research- and practice-driven assumptions: (1) principals are a key lever for school improvement; (2) learning is collective and collaborative; and (3) complex change demands the involvement of multiple parts of the organization. To ground these assumptions theoretically and to inform the theory of action driving this project, I have integrated elements from the conceptual frameworks of (1) social learning theory; (2) adult learning and development; (3) change theory; and (4) organizational learning. The review of knowledge for action proceeds as follows. First, I present a description of the context in which this project was conducted, including city and district demographics, an organizational overview, and the recent history of work in the district relevant to this project's aims. Next, I describe how each of the four guiding frameworks applies to the work of this project at both the principal and central office level. I then use these frameworks to support the theory of action presented at the end of this section, which frames the work of this capstone project.

Pittsburgh's City and School Demographics

City and district demographics. Although Pittsburgh has moved away from its well-known steel industry, the city is currently thriving economically and culturally. Google and other companies now recognize the hassle-free living the city provides, along with a spirit of hard work and innovation. There is also a vibrant academic community in Pittsburgh, with the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University, and Duquesne University all within the city limits. Furthermore, Pittsburgh has a national reputation as a

city that has been able to remake itself, as President Obama recently noted: “We’ve watched cities like Pittsburgh or my hometown of Chicago revamp themselves. And if we give more cities the tools to do it—not handouts, but a hand up—cities like Detroit can do it, too” (Obama, 2013).

However, the economic renaissance here has not reached all the city’s neighborhoods, as there is still a great deal of poverty in Pittsburgh. For example, Pittsburgh leads the country’s cities in the percentage of Black children under the age of five who are born into poverty, with a staggering 60% (Wallace, 2014). No other U.S. city is within 10 percentage points of Pittsburgh. Furthermore, the city’s topography of hills and bridges and rivers creates natural divisions that have helped to create strong neighborhoods with strong community pride, but they also serve as dividers that segregate the population by race and socioeconomic status. These divisions also have weakened the political mobilization of Blacks by dividing them into several smaller communities in ways not found in other northern cities (Glasco, 2014). With these natural divisions, it’s very difficult to break down certain man-made barriers that perpetuate racial and economic segregation in the city.

Racial inequalities are also reflected in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, which is the second largest school system in Pennsylvania. In the 2013-2014 school year, PPS has approximately 25,900 students in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade, who are nested in 54 schools and instructed by 1,875 teachers (Pittsburgh Public Schools, 2014). The district has seen a decline in enrollment over the last decade, from over 35,146 students in 2003 (Council of the Great City Schools [CGCS], 2006) to its current number, which represents an approximately 25% decline. The reasons for this decline are many,

including people moving out of the city to the suburbs, a declining school-age population, and the emergence of charter schools (Pittsburgh Public Schools, 2013). The current student body is disproportionately Black and disproportionately poor, relative to the overall city population. Fifty-four percent of students in the city's schools are African American, while the city's Black population is only about 30%. Thirty-four percent of students are White, and all other races combined comprise less than 12% of the student body. Meanwhile, 71% of the district's enrollment is composed of students who are eligible for the free and reduced-price lunch subsidy. There are also strong patterns of racial segregation in the schools, with Black and White students largely clustering in either same-race institutions or same-race tracks within their schools. In addition, 18.1% of the 25,900 students in PPS have disabilities.

District governance. A school board of nine members who are locally elected to staggered four-year terms governs the district. Each member represents a different area of the city, and the board is the policy-making body of the city's school system. The board hires the superintendent of schools, who then oversees district operations (CGCS, 2010). The current superintendent, Dr. Linda Lane, formerly a deputy superintendent in charge of overseeing all schools and principals, was elected to the position in 2010. Dr. Lane has set three priorities for her tenure: to raise student achievement, illuminate racial disparities, and become a district of first choice; she recently added developing a student-focused culture. The recently published strategic plan, titled *Whole Child, Whole Community*, which was adopted in 2013, outlines the following strategies for actualizing the districts priorities: (1) Improve Fiscal Sustainability; (2) Invest in People; (3) Invest in Student Performance/Refocus on Academic Milestones; and (4) Partner with the

Community in a New Way. The Whole Child, Whole Community district reform plan outlines a systemic reform strategy of collective impact.

Dr. Lane is seeking dialogue and support from the community and philanthropic sectors in order to address the decline in student achievement (outlined in more detail below), while also contending with the district's large financial deficit. Grounded in a vision of equity and a core belief that all children can learn and be college or career ready at graduation time, this plan outlines priority areas for improving the academic performance of all students in the district. Paramount is Dr. Lane's emphasis on a student-focused culture that is attentive to structures and systems, and that invests in people. Dr. Lane has installed several initiatives that begins to address these interests, including (1) the LETRS program, which is designed to raise understanding of literacy development processes among teachers and principals; (2) Investment in Instructional Teacher Leaders 2 (ITL2), a program that supports teacher leadership development by training them to observe and provide quality feedback to other teachers; and (3) the Promise Readiness Core, a program in which key staff in high-needs schools develop wrap-around services for the continued support of cohorts of 9th-grade students. Additionally, the Center for Educational Leadership and the Pacific Educational Group continue to support the district's people-centered investments in the areas of leadership development and racial diversity training, respectively.

These student-centered approaches and human investments are very timely, given the increasing external pressures of the broader high-accountability, testing-driven policy context. These pressures center around linking teachers' and principals' performance ratings directly to student achievement outcomes, as measured by standardized tests.

Locally this pressure has been increased by Act 82 (2012), which requires that 50% of teacher and principal evaluations be based on student outcome measures.² PPS is seen by many of its principals as having a tightly centralized organizational structure, which is perhaps due at least in part to this prescriptive broader policy context. More specifically, many PPS principals and central office workers describe a work environment that is traditional and top-down, including prescriptive and compliance-heavy relationships with the schools. These tightly centralized practices are demonstrated by centrally identified and administered professional learning priorities and training for both principals and teachers; a growing sense that teacher effectiveness efforts are more centered around evaluation than the intended support; and, until recently, mandated use of what used to be referred to as a managed curriculum.

While it is admittedly difficult to measure whether a tightly centralized management approach in school districts is less than advantageous for student achievement (Marzano et al., 2009), it is important to note that, prior to NCLB, central offices did not perform such teaching- and learning-related functions; their focus was largely on infrastructure and human resources (Honig, 2013). Thus, in working to meet these relatively new post-NCLB achievement-related imperatives, Honig (2013) calls for district leaders to “set aside old ways of working and fundamentally transform their central offices” and suggests that a central office transformation needs to involve “creating partnerships between principals and executive-level central office staff, developing and aligning performance-oriented central office services to support district-

² PPS’s comprehensive teacher evaluation approach (discussed later) actually predates Act 82 and weighs student achievement outcomes differently by incorporating student survey data. Currently the district is operating under a one-year exemption from Act 82 and is seeking a longer-term approval of its own evaluation tool (PPS, 2014).

wide instructional improvement, and establishing superintendent and other central office leadership that will help staff build their capacity for better performance” (p. 1). Thus, at this point in time, PPS is balancing the intersection of a high-demand policy context and a cultural challenge in terms of its relations with its principal core, and is continuing to grow in its capacity to meet more teaching- and learning-oriented needs than it had to in the past, when the central office focus was much more managerial. Accordingly, my capstone project was designed in part to support the district’s efforts in managing these intersecting challenges by piloting new strategies in principal partnerships.

Achievement and assessment in PPS. Overall reports of academic progress are mixed in PPS. First, graduation rates in the district have recently been on the rise. The 2012 4-year cohort graduation rate in PPS was 73%, up from 68% and 69% in 2011 and 2010, respectively (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014; Pittsburgh Public Schools, 2013; Pittsburgh Today, 2014). Also, the Pennsylvania Value Added Assessment System, which measures how well schools meet the expected growth, given their profiles, has shown that PPS students have exceeded growth expectations in math and reading in the tested grades (3-8; PPS, 2013).

Despite these favorable developments, there is more work to be done for PPS in other areas. First, overall proficiency levels have trended downward recently. According to results from the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment and the Keystone Exams, after nearly a decade of slow but steady growth, PPS has had a sharp decline in the number of its students at or above the proficiency level in both reading and mathematics. Specifically, across all testing grade levels in 2011, 60.8 % of students in reading and 66.2% in mathematics were at or above proficiency. In 2012 these figures were 58.8%

and 62.4% for reading and math, respectively, and the 2013 numbers are 52.7% in reading and 57.0% in math. Furthermore, in 2013, 23 of 54 Pittsburgh's public schools (43%) were among the bottom 15% in school performance in the state. Still, it should be noted that proficiency declines in Pittsburgh are in step with the overall statewide declines, particularly in urban districts. Thus, PPS is one of many districts in Pennsylvania trying to address this issue.

PPS faces additional challenges in the area of racial achievement disparities. In 2012, math proficiency rates among our Black students were 27 percentage points lower than those of our White students, and Black students were 29 percentage points lower in reading. Graduation rates show similar disparities. In 2011, the graduation rate for White PPS students was 77.9%, whereas the rate for Black students was only 63% (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014). These inequities have persisted over time, and racial background now seems to determine whether children will face sharp declines in achievement and diminished long-term academic outcomes.

GPA and attendance are key indicators of school completion and college success, and more than one-quarter of students enter high school critically off track, with GPA and attendance rates that suggest their chances of making it through high school are tenuous at best. What's worse, the percentage of African American high school students critically off track is more than double the rate among their White counterparts. Unfortunately, this achievement gap is seen as early as kindergarten, where the percentage of African American students failing a course is twice that of White students.

To be sure, these racial equity challenges are not new, and they came to a head in 1992 when a lawsuit filed against the district cited the need for racial equity in

achievement outcomes (PPS, 2014). PPS has responded since that time by creating an equity advisory panel and installing a comprehensive equity plan. Through this work, several markers of acute inequity have been identified, such as the over-identification of African American boys to special education and high rates of suspension (Pittsburgh Public School Equity Plan, 2012, p. 8). Acknowledging the existence of racially biased practices shows that PPS leadership is in fact concerned with the racialized perceptions of students held throughout the district and city-wide, and with the interactions and decision-making that are informed by those perceptions. Thus, the district has taken the important first step of embracing these challenges. Accordingly, despite good intentions and commitment from the top, the context for this project was a school district that was facing significant achievement challenges, as well as a lack of racial equity in educational opportunities and outcomes. These issues provided the bedrock rationale for the much needed transformation that has to take place in PPS at both the school level and the central office level.

Teacher accountability and evaluation reforms: Leading the way. In response to the national call for more rigorous ways to understand and evaluate teacher effectiveness, PPS has received almost \$90 million over the past four years to support its efforts to revamp its teacher-evaluation system in ways that would deepen its understanding and recognition of high-quality instruction, while also offering a way to clearly distinguish differences in teacher effectiveness (PPS, 2014). These efforts have included the collaborative work of over 100 teachers and another 300 school leaders, staff members, and experts from around the country, who are utilizing the well-established Danielson framework as a basis for teacher effectiveness standards. In framing this work,

PPS has focused primarily on three broader strategic priorities: (1) to increase the number of highly effective teachers, (2) to increase high-needs students' exposure to effective teachers, and (3) to ensure that all teachers and students work in learning environments that promote college readiness. One product of this work is the Research-based Inclusive System of Evaluation (RISE), a teaching rubric and evaluation system that currently plays a major role in the teacher empowerment work, as it outlines the standards-based process of observation, evidence collection, and supported growth.

Despite the evaluation rubric's promise, reports by a consulting firm suggest that one common strategic challenge that emerged across the partner sites, both school districts and charter management organizations, was supporting principals to lead the work of increasing teacher effectiveness. Part of what made this issue so visible was that using the evaluation rubric had unintended effects in terms of the time it took for principals to complete the numerous required observations, which became overwhelming. Bambrick-Santoyo (2012a) discusses this phenomenon's occurrence in the field more broadly, and comments that "every moment spent filling in a teacher evaluation rubric is a moment not used working directly with a teacher, carefully guiding him or her to improvement . . . One of the largest obstacles standing in the way of school leaders today is the sheer volume of non-instructional work they face" (p. 7), work that does not directly improve students' learning experiences. In fact, in a review of their own practices in this evaluation initiative, a major foundation contributing to PPS's teacher evaluation efforts has noted that sites are "concerned that the role is manageable and there is time for

the principals to do the job” (Foundation³, 2013). This perspective is aligned with my own firsthand experience as a school leader; while my 2005-2011 urban school principalship in New York City’s Harlem neighborhood at its core was about instructional improvement and the enterprise of teaching and learning, the complexity of the principal’s role, especially in an urban district, inevitably included political and managerial challenges that almost always competed with instructional priorities.

Given these unintended negative consequences, Pittsburgh and other districts have raised important questions about the principal’s optimal role in instructional reform efforts. PPS has in fact taken steps to revise its original evaluation rubric application to make it more efficient for principals, including emphasizing a reduced number of “power components” to help principals prioritize from among the original 24 components. Also, the ITL2 position, mentioned previously, has been installed to develop and train teacher leaders in the evaluation process to help reduce the load that principals must take on. Lastly, PPS principals, through the Instructional Quality Assurance (IQA) initiative, receive professional development on how to conduct the evaluations, how to use the rubrics to give quality feedback to teachers, how to leverage areas of strengths for teachers, and how to connect teachers with resources to improve their practice. These are essential learning opportunities for principals that move them well beyond using the rubric for checking boxes.

Across these processes, PPS and partnering districts are acknowledging principals’ pivotal role beyond evaluation as the primary instructional leader responsible for continually improving teacher effectiveness and student learning (Center for

³ This is a pseudonym for the name of the actual foundation.

Educational Leadership [CEL], 2013a). According to Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Whalstrom (2004), “Leadership is second only to teaching among all school-based factors that contributes to student learning,” (p. 5). So, while great teaching makes education effective, many also recognize that the quality of teaching is a principal’s key responsibility. Principal leadership is therefore a key factor in effective schools (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012; Fink & Markholt, 2011; Krug, 1992). Moreover, Krug (1992) holds that the quality of leadership in effective schools appears to be critical in why they succeed while others fail. Rotherham (2010) writes similarly that “school leaders have a multiplier effect—they can put in place conditions that help or hamstring effective teaching” (p. 1). In terms of their teacher evaluation project specifically, the major foundation supporting these efforts has acknowledged the need for principals to be trained in effective coaching as well as evaluation, thereby recognizing principals’ need for both time and training in instructional leadership—and not just evaluative leadership—as a part of coordinated teacher improvement efforts.

With such attention now refocused on principals as instructional leaders, important questions have risen about how PPS should reorganize to support its principals. A key issue is that principals in PPS, as in many districts nationally, are often challenged to find time to focus on instructional leadership and management, given their many other competing priorities. Jerald (2012) reports that, “on average, urban school principals spend only 8-17 percent of their time on activities related to instructional leadership, and some evidence suggests that half of those activities lack sufficient focus to have any real chance of helping teachers improve instruction” (p. 2). Maxwell (2014) reports that principals spend about 13% of their time on instructional tasks, 5.4% of that on

walkthroughs that are of questionable effectiveness. Maxwell suggests further that, of the instructional activities, coaching may pay one of the biggest dividends. Thus, principals in PPS have been finding it difficult to meet the demands of evaluation while also giving needed attention to other aspects of instructional leadership that matter, such as coaching and professional development for teachers. Consequently, despite the collaborative role that teachers played in the rubric's creation stages, in the current implementation stages, principals are reporting that nervous teachers are experiencing more of the evaluation side of the work than its growth and support aspects. Thus, at the advent of my project, the district and its principals were trying to determine how to foster a culture of trust with teachers most effectively when the evaluation-heavy focus was making teachers afraid of losing their jobs.

Fink and Markholt (2011) present a compelling definition of instructional leadership as “leaders charged with improvement of teaching practice who must understand and be able to explain what good practice looks like in order to lead and guide professional development, target and align resources, and engage in ongoing problem solving and long-range capacity building” (p. 16). They place such leadership at the center of teacher improvement, noting that “without developing this expertise school leaders can struggle to provide the leadership necessary to improve teaching practice” (p. 16).

Principal support model: National trends and local needs. While it is clear that a paradigm shift around the emphasis on and approach to principal support is needed in many urban districts like Pittsburgh, it is very challenging to determine how to carry out this work. At PPS, as in many districts, the assistant superintendent stands at the center of

this work, directly supporting and supervising principals. In fact, central offices across the country support and supervise principals primarily through this role, which has many titles, depending on which district you are in: assistant superintendent, instructional directors, network leaders, executive directors, etc. (CGCS, 2013). According to the Council of the Great City Schools, the average length of time people stay in their assistant superintendent position is approximately three years, suggesting that turnover in the position nationwide has been extensive. More importantly, one challenge in designing these roles well is that the role of principal itself has changed a great deal over the last decade, shifting from managerial and regulatory tasks to improving teaching and learning. Principals thus increasingly need support that aligns with the relatively new responsibility of instructional leadership (Wallace Foundation, 2012).

Accordingly, Samuels (2012) reports that many districts over the past several years have been moving away from priorities focused on compliance and management and toward a role in instructional leadership support. Samuels also notes, however, that it is still unclear in the research what central office staff members need to do to be effective in the role of “principal coach.” In fact, Bambrick-Santoyo (2012b) outlines three more standard practices that are not yielding the desired results. These include a prominent strategy used by principal supervisors that he calls the “the point-and-shoot-method” (p. 70), or a reliance on walkthroughs, which provide only a snapshot of instruction. He notes that, although this momentary approach can provide a wealth of data on school and classroom culture, it does not offer a comprehensive view of the school’s instructional well-being. Bambrick also describes what he calls the “macro-lens method,” in which principal support leaders spend two or three days in a school doing a thorough review,

but mostly around issues of documentation and compliance. Bambrick notes that “even though the level of detail is high, these reviews still only provide a snapshot of a school, again with little to say about instruction in a building” (p. 70). Bambrick also talks about a common, more hands-off practice that he names “the wide zoom method,” whereby principal support staff never actually visit the schools, relying instead on reports from school staff about how the school is progressing. Bambrick understandably finds that, although all these supervisory tools have some value, over-relying on any one of them as a general approach is a deeply flawed strategy. We cannot drive school improvement through the blanket use of any of these tools. Yes, they may in different ways be able to scaffold principals’ learning, but they cannot in isolation be drivers of the improvement.

PPS understands that it faces the challenges of shifting principal support practices. In 2013, the district hired a new chief of school performance, who was charged with ensuring that the assistant superintendents received support and development, and who immediately began working to re-envision the office of school support for the 2014-2015 school year. A key consideration in her new vision is the fact that assistant superintendents currently are the main district officers overseeing the implementation of policy at the school level, and that they are charged with ensuring compliance with all of these policies, including implementing the curriculum, documenting classroom observations, and properly and regularly entering data online. In short, their duties have been mostly compliance based, with too little focus on improving instructional leadership. Given these compliance-centered duties, two important questions are how they spend their time when they are actually in the schools and how we might refocus that time to meet instructional goals. To answer these questions locally requires

determining a set of best practices when there is only limited consensus in the literature. Nevertheless, the Wallace Foundation (2013) compiled the limited research that is available and suggests that there is emerging evidence of five main skills that those in the position of principal support personnel must have, including the ability to:

(1) identify the training needs of the principals they supervise and provide this on an individualized basis; (2) manage learning networks among the principals with whom they work; (3) strengthen principals' accountability by setting goals and objectives, supporting them in achieving them, and holding them accountable for the results; (4) strategically marshal resources and relationships in the community and serve as a buffer for principals with local groups; and (5) develop clear and shared visions and policies that focus on instructional improvement. (p. 14)

Lastly, across the nation we have seen that one challenge in increasing instructional support in these roles has created issues of capacity in large urban districts. Research has shown that some coaches report being responsible for so many principals that they do not feel they can give each one enough individual attention (CGCS, 2013; Honig et al., 2010). They must instead work with principals where the need is greatest, so that experienced principals often receive less attention and feedback (CGCS, 2013). These issues are familiar to PPS as well. Before the start of my project, PPS had only two full-time multipurpose principal support officers, who were assisted by two instructional specialists. Together these four supported all the principals and assistant principals across the district's 54 schools. Moreover, although 75% of the assistant superintendents' time was spent on school visits, each had approximately 27 schools, so when travel time was factored in, they only got to visit each school every four to six weeks. Thus, in

considering best practices in supporting instructional leadership in PPS, this project needed to set achievable levels of capacity in this work.

In sum, urban districts like Pittsburgh are facing great challenges in terms of both total achievement and achievement equity. A national policy emphasis on instructional improvement is calling on districts to be more effective in managing these efforts centrally, but school district central offices were historically designed for regulatory or business support, and not with the primary function in mind, as Honig (2012) describes, to “support teaching and learning improvement, let alone provide intensive supports for principals’ instructional leadership” (p. 735). With these new goals in mind, principal supervisors, or assistant superintendents as they are titled in Pittsburgh, represent the primary boundary-crossers between principals and the central office. Given the emerging recognition of their pivotal role in large-scale instructional improvement reforms by foundations and researchers alike, assistant superintendents must be instrumental in PPS’s coherent change strategy.

These needs are hampered, however, by the fact that best practices in principal supervision are only now emerging in the field. Honig (2012) in fact draws an analogy to teaching science, noting that there is much more work to be done: “The field of teacher education has made great advances in building knowledge about successful teaching by elaborating teaching practices—the moves teachers make with their own learners within the context of various activities—that strengthen their students’ learning . . . The field of leadership would do well to take a similar approach” (p. 765). Moreover, in Pittsburgh specifically, the challenges of principals receiving support from the central office are compounded by the negative sentiments and experiences among principals with regard to

the central office. The overall situation leaves PPS with the unique challenge of completing a transformation that is at least as much cultural as it is technical. And again, there is no clear path in the literature to support and guide this type of multilevel organizational challenge.

Therefore, this project seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge in the area of principal support and its requisite district-level cultural change. In addition to building on the best practices in principal supervision that have been compiled so far, this project draws from four bodies of literature to advance the needs of districts like Pittsburgh. Essentially, in order to effectively and sustainably address issues of know-how, cultural challenges, and capacity limitations, helpful strategies are drawn from the areas of social learning theory, adult development, organizational learning, and change theory. Accordingly, in each of these areas, this literature review looks beyond the assistance role I played with principals and delves into the informal roles I assumed at the central office, including being a cabinet member and having access to a host of other central office teams and core offices. This work also explores a larger strategy for the district as a whole and its development as a learning organization. A summary of this bifurcated strategy that explains how the theories below apply to both the principal support and central office levels can be seen in Table 1.

Social Learning Theory across Organizational Levels

Community of practice. A community of practice is a group of people formed to engage in a process of collective learning around a particular domain. They share a mutual concern or passion for something, and through their regular interaction they learn how to do it better (Wenger, 2000). Many have argued that a district's entire body of central

office administrators should be conceptualized as nested communities of practice. In this view, “central office administrators operate in chains of assistance relationships in which each person assists and is assisted by one or many others in the central office hierarchy” (Honig, 2008, p. 641). Thus, beyond considering communities of practice as part of a principal support structure alone, this project considered how feasible it was for the position of assistant superintendent to help to reframe central office support of teaching and learning initiatives in ways that would plant the seeds for the cultivation of lateral learning, horizontal accountability, and leadership that cultivates high expectations and internal accountability at the district leadership level.

Boundary-spanning. Assistant superintendents have the unique position of existing in both the central office and school-level spheres. Honig (2008) describes how the role of central office agent equips assistant superintendents with district-designed processes and structures that get moved across the boundary by their assistant superintendent work. For example, PPS has such tools as the district curriculum and the RISE rubric described previously, which although developed jointly with district teacher and principal input can still be referred to as “reified” tools or “boundary objects” that get transferred from the central office to schools at large. My interactions with principals have shown that these jointly developed measures still require the negotiation of meaning and the appropriation of these tools in principals’ and teachers’ practices. As a boundary-crosser, the assistant superintendents support the principals in appropriating these reified tools through a sense-making process, whereby they discuss and negotiate their meaning as the tools take up residence in the schools and influence how the principals and teachers

spend their time, what they think, and what they teach. Ultimately, it's the actual implementation of central office policy.

Table 1: Core Theory and Multilevel Applications

	Principal Support	Central Office Cultural Change
Social Learning Theory	• Communities of practice • Search process: collect evidence of existing practice • Joint work •	• Communities of practice as goal • Search process: report evidence to incite change
Adult Learning and Development	• Knowing how developmental level impacts social learning • Transcending socialized self to impact system • Self-authoring • Immunity to change for personal improvement goals	• Establishing holding environments for risk-taking on teams
Change Theory and Adaptive Challenges	• Adaptive solutions at the school level • Individual self-reflection • 7 premises of school-level change • Self-assessments (strengths-finding, leadership inventory) • Coaching	• Adaptive solutions at the district level • Collective self-reflection • 3 principles of district-level change • Collective assessments (decision-making, plus delta) • Modeling
Organizational Learning Theory	• Cultural change in schools • School as learning organization • Diagnose issues in their schools	• Cultural change at central office • District as learning organization • Diagnose issues in the district

Search process. A promising use of the assistant superintendent's boundary-spanning role is participation in a process that has been called "search" (Honig, 2008, p.

643; see also “Exploration” in Levitt & March, 1988). Search occurs through activities in which organizational members, such as central office administrators, scan their environment for evidence of effective practices that they might use to inform what they do at the policy and support levels. In Honig’s (2008) words, “Such evidence might reveal activities at the school level that seem to contribute to high-quality teaching and learning, or missing resources that seem to impede school improvement” (p. 643).

As boundary-spanners, assistant superintendents play a key role in this search model. They use their learning-focused partnerships with principals as an opportunity to search the landscape and bring back meaningful lessons the organization can use to improve its larger practices and support strategies. The power of this search framework is illuminated when recalling Wagner and Kegan’s (2006) concept that any system or organization is perfectly designed to bring about the exact results that it is currently experiencing. Thus, in order to disrupt the unintentional designs of struggling systems, the assistant superintendent must use this boundary-spanning role to develop a kind of reciprocal learning situation with the principals, which might help them all to better understand, diagnose, and change systemic issues.

Honig (2008) writes about another facet of the search process in which the assistant superintendent, through sense-making, negotiation, joint work, and participation in this learning-centered relationship with principals, deepens his or her understanding of how these reified documents meet with daily practices in schools. In this way, the central office is flexible and responsive to the “search” data shared by the assistant superintendent. Honig holds that this work is far from a passive, one-time activity, and she characterizes the practice not only as the negotiation of the meaning of the boundary

objects, but rather as a “continuous process of identifying conditions and ideas outside the organization that the organization should address to improve performance” (p. 360).

Yet beyond the actual quality of these tools, how these organizational brokers or boundary-spanners are received on the school side of the boundary—that is, how principals and teachers perceive them as facilitators or hinders of their learning—is contingent on the status of the boundary-crosser on the school side. Honig (2008), building on Wegner’s notions, notes that “such ability seems to hinge on whether brokers appear legitimate to the receiving community and therefore a trusted resource” (p. 639). Thus, as part of this work, the legitimacy of what an assistant superintendent has to offer both school and district office personnel must be established, and sooner rather than later. If people don’t trust that the person is both competent in the area at hand and deserving of the position, then the assistant superintendent’s ability to effect change at either level will be hindered. Being an outsider, in my pilot I had to work to build my credibility with the principals in order to do the work.

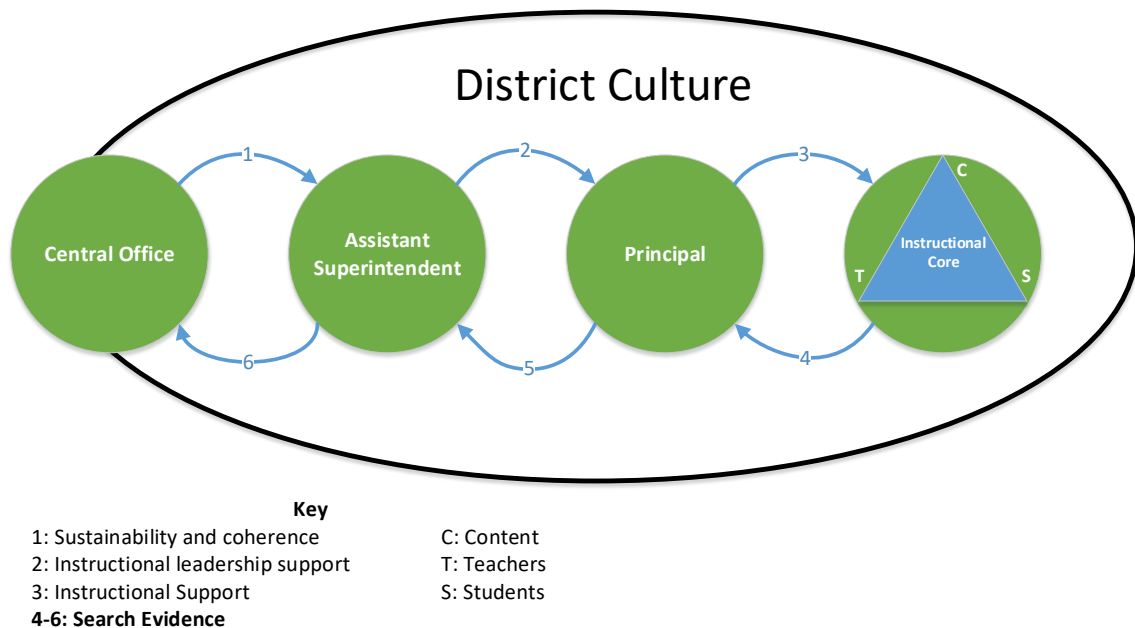
Achieving legitimacy was made easier when, before my project was formalized, Dr. Lane, who is committed to the search element of a learning organization, essentially took on the temporary role of a “street-level bureaucrat” (Honig, 2006b) and began “searching” for evidence that could be incorporated into policy and the overall function of the central office by meeting with every principal, at their schools or in her office, and inviting me to join her. This helped tremendously in allowing the principals to be open to working with me. She also authorized this pilot project, which in itself may be viewed as a search opportunity or exploration for evidence that may highlight more or less effective ways of participating in assistance relationships.

Overall, my project used the ideal search agent, the principal supporter, and in the process Dr. Lane strategically authorized me. This authorization was strategic because, as a new person who came to the organization with fresh eyes and was not yet socialized into the habits and the culture of the system, I was uniquely positioned to bring back information in a way that was different from someone who had been there for many years. Allowing me to do so while lifting the constraints of compliance and evaluation that assistant superintendents traditionally faced enabled me to focus on enhancing the current practice of this key central office role. Moreover, as is consistent with organizational learning research, bringing my firsthand experience successfully leading a high-needs school in East Harlem and my two years of doctoral studies in systems-level leadership to the central office search role was likely to yield nuanced data-collection strategies and subsequent school-level insights that the central office might want to use and/or support at the policy and practice levels. The search process across district levels is illustrated in Figure 1.

In sum, in social learning theory we see the potential to impact district work at many levels through the strategic employment of communities of practice, boundary-crossing, and search practices. In their role as boundary-crossers between the school and central office levels, assistant superintendents have the potential to produce work that provides critical support to the learning and leadership of school principals and effectively catalyzes the central office transformation. Honig (2008) describes the potential of the latter: “Given the detailed, contextual knowledge likely to become available through the assistance relationship, engagement in these relationships appears as a primary potential search strategy—a strategy for bringing in ideas, images, data,

examples, and other forms of evidence that could inform how other central office administrators go about their work” (p. 643). For my project, then, work that involved boundary-crossing was a major priority. As seen above, using this framework, in addition to my efforts to establish a community of practice, I worked to incorporate the search concept into the work I did as a principal supporter, gathering information with the intent of using work on the ground to inform or be continually incorporated into the thinking and policy decisions in the central office.

Figure 1: Search Process Embedded in District Culture



Adult Learning and Development

When thinking about the need for cultural transformation in PPS, leadership in both the central office and the schools must begin to cultivate the individual mindsets, habits, and skills that are closely related to the tenets of social learning theory. These ideas are critically important in districts like Pittsburgh, where cultural change is a

priority, particularly regarding the role compliance plays in the relationship between the central office and school leaders. As discussed above, adult development work is necessary to wake these professionals from what, from an ecological perspective, is an understandable compliance norm. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2013), interpreting Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, notes that "development is characterized by reciprocity, mutual accommodation and interaction between the person and his/her environment." More specifically, Bronfenbrenner notes that the environment that is relevant to development is not only the immediate setting but also the interactions among more broad-based environments that are nested within each other. Applying this framework to the PPS context, we know that principals and assistant superintendents are impacted not only by local district mandates but also by federal and state mandates. Yet in my work as a principal in New York City and with PPS principals alike, I found that, in the process of coping, many principals internalized some deep behavioral norms, even if they were derived from less productive institutional structures. Others have expressed feelings that, although there are many mandated tools and tasks in which they don't believe, they do not feel they have the agency to challenge the mandates nor the autonomy to set them aside.

Thus, a key question for this project was what approaches have the potential to develop the capacity for agency that will enable principals to responsibly challenge and/or set aside compliance requirements that are not in the best interests of their students and their families. This project holds that Kegan's self-authoring principle can be of help here. While there is some need for caution among principals who are maneuvering through undesired mandates, my experience as a school principal has shown me that there

is room for creative tension in the relationship between individual autonomy and institutional power. I have seen effective principals take a stand that eventually benefited the district through search-like processes. Therefore, this work is designed with the understanding that, just as the institution imprints the individual, the individual in turn imprints the institution. The need to cultivate agency requires a keen understanding of how adults develop such a trait in the context of competing institutional demands.

To that end, whenever I work with adults I adopt a developmental perspective that speaks to the plasticity of who they are and what their potential is to increase in capacity and become, as Kegan and Lahey (2009) would say, more consciously aware.

Understanding that adults have the ability to learn and to reinvent themselves in ways that increase their own capacity through increased self-authoring, this project seeks to incorporate elements of Kegan's adult learning theory and immunity to change into my support of principals. I hold that one of the most important roles of the central office is to support principals in laying the groundwork for adult learning that leads to continuous improvement at all levels of the system—the central office, principals, teachers, and students alike. Furthermore, no one level of a school system alone can dictate its success over the long term, so developing a culture of continuous improvement at every level of the system is essential to improving student learning outcomes over time.

Change Theory for Adaptive Challenges

Cultural shifts at the central office. Cultural shifts at the central office can be defined as an adaptive challenge. Redefining the principal support role has implications, and not only for the principals themselves; as the scholarship suggests, effectively redefining such a crucial role will also require that the culture of the central office be

transformed to support and sustain the change (Fullan, 2001; Honig et al., 2010). This is certainly true in my experience as a school leader, where the leadership practices of central office managers seemed to strongly influence the leadership practices of school principals. This assertion is consistent with Fullan's (2006) application of change theory to school improvement. He holds that unless a strategy or theory of action includes the harder questions such as "under what conditions will continuous improvement happen?" and "how do we change cultures?" (p. 4) they are doomed to failure. Fullan goes on to discuss how, at the district level, the sometimes daunting focus on culture in the face of needed reforms helps those involved avoid falling prey to tempting but unenduring quick-fix technical strategies. Fullan notes that organizational culture "is not easy to alter and this is indeed why people have failed to tackle it. It is easier to go to the formal definable elements which, although they are not 'quick fixes' . . . are comparatively easier to define and manipulate" (p. 6).

Under Dr. Lane's leadership, PPS has recognized these cultural needs as well. Dr. Lane's (2013) recently outlined Whole School, Whole Community plan is a vision for the district to address achievement and fiscal responsibilities simultaneously. In it she notes that three key levers for progress in the plan are "people, structures, and culture" (p. 3). So how exactly does cultural transformation happen? Transformation of the central office culture is best envisioned as an adaptive challenge, which Heifetz and Linsky (2002) define as a challenge for which there are no obvious or easy solutions. Therefore, meeting the challenge requires not only that people learn new ways of operating but also that they actually experience the problem to help them do the work of solving it. The highly

complex problem of cultural change in PPS meets these criteria, and thus it requires new strategies and changes within the individuals involved.

The heart of my central office work in this project is to make a positive contribution to the complex task of cultural change, which I approach with admittedly tempered expectations, given my informal position of authority. Although I was a peer rather than an authority to my central office colleagues, Elmore (2004) suggests that such a position can in fact be a starting point for cultural change. He observes that cultures “do not change by mandate; they change by the specific displacement of existing norms; structures, and processes by others; the process of culture change depends fundamentally on modeling the new values and behaviors that you expect to displace the existing ones” (p. 9). Therefore, using Elmore’s framework for cultural change, for the central office component of this project I sought to use the influence my informal authority and my memberships on cross-functional teams gave me to plant what seeds I could for cultural shifts in the larger organization. Thus my central office activities, which included the Equity Team, Envisioning Team, Executive Cabinet, and School Support Team, were informed by the often tacit but sometimes explicit perspective that positive cultural shifts in the central office can help develop the leadership team’s capacity to conceive of and sustain effective professional learning for principals.

Adaptive challenges in principal support. In this project, adaptive challenges are not only the domain of central office cultural change. I hold that providing expert coaching to school leaders and supporting them by having them form their own community of practice encourages lateral learning, which means that the solutions to their problems rest with them and not at the top. Thus, such strategies represent adaptive

approaches to the adaptive challenge of instructional leadership in the PPS context, and they almost certainly will be characterized by core adaptive strategy approaches of trial and error, reflection, short feedback loops, and continuous improvement (Wagner & Kegan, 2006). Moreover, the coaching will call for a substantial shift of mindset among principals as the central office's boundary-spanners move away from compliance-based relationships to relationships that are more supportive. Such shifts mean moving from being told what to do to being engaged in asking questions and generating solutions at a fundamental level, and from evaluation-centered to support-centered. Therefore, the principal support initiative I sought to model was intended to eliminate the regulatory and business support model of telling, complying, and evaluating, and replace it by investing in the principals as whole people with potentially great contributions to make to address multifaceted problems. This investment included support for their growth and development as instructional leaders and of personal mastery constructs, and an investment in their participation in a community of practice for lateral learning. Finally, this work also included developing the search evidence regarding principals' adaptive challenges and reporting it to the central office. This principal support work cannot be redefined without a simultaneous strategy to determine what people in the central office should know and be able to do to support the principals' adaptive leadership work. The two are inextricably linked.

Coherence across the district's organizational levels. Part of the need for a strong central office culture comes from the idea of coherence across levels of an organization, which Elmore (2014a) describes as the need for enduring practices that can be replicated at every level of a system. More specifically, Elmore talks about how the

work of principal managers in the schools should mirror the work that the best teachers do with their students and the work that the best principals do with their teachers. In essence, the question here is how we develop good classroom teaching so it becomes the foundational aspects of the work, at every level. Elmore's discussion, then, is a distinction of interactions represented in the instructional core, and I have found that this concept of coherence reflects my own experiences, both as a classroom teacher and later as a principal in the same school. The idea of coherence across levels of the district organization are represented in Figure 2, which portrays what I have come to call the multilevel instructional core model.

The advantage of coherence is that, once levels of an organization are of one accord, it not only ensures improvement for the individuals playing the role of learner at every level, it ensures the alignment of a district-wide vision across organizational tiers. Thus, as Bambrick-Santoyo (2012) and Honig (2012) suggest, principal managers should also be viewed as teachers. Given the power of central office culture, my membership in it, and my role as a boundary-crosser, attention to coherence naturally became part of my work on both levels.

Organizational Learning Theory

Need for a learning organization. Many hold that instructional leadership has to be supported at all levels of the system: the central office, schools, and classrooms (Elmore, 2014a; Fullan, 2006; Honig, 2008; Wagner & Kegan, 2006). Others say that this type of development, where necessary, is an adaptive shift in the central office, and that it thus amounts to what many have described as the need to become a learning organization (Elmore, 2014a; Honig, 2008; Wagner & Kegan, 2006). Accordingly, in the face of the

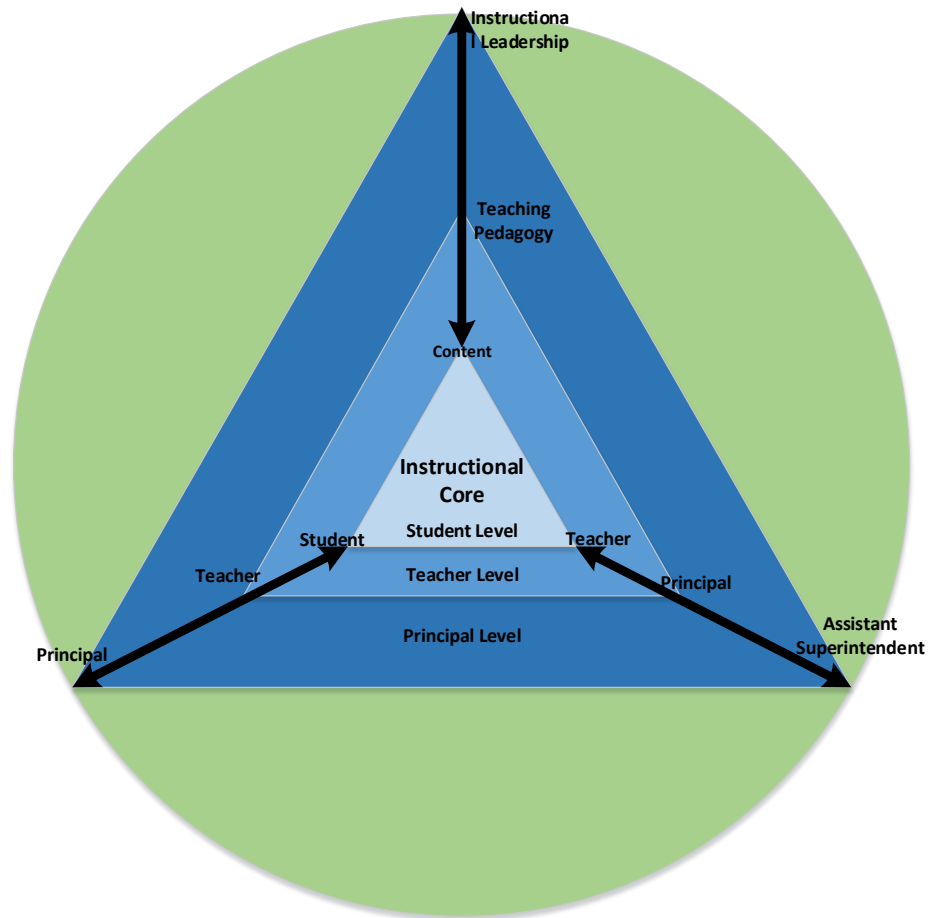
kinds of stubborn racial gaps and inconsistent success we have seen in PPS over time and across students and schools, some educational scholars and reformers have called on school districts and their central offices to move away from compliance, evaluation, and heavy top-down mandates toward operating as learning organizations or learning systems (Elmore, 2004; Honig, 2008; Kegan & Wagner, 2006). More specifically, Kegan and Wagner (2006) note that complex change like this demands involvement from multiple parts of the organization, and thus calls for the system to become a learning organization so it can handle the complexity and ambiguity that is the nature of this work.

Becoming an effective learning organization is not easy; since, as with principal support, there is a lack of well-documented models for how to do it, this type of transformation to date is somewhat uncharted territory. Of this lack of district transformational models, Honig (2008) writes, “Such calls conjure up powerful and compelling images of dynamic organizations that seem consistent with central office engagement in teaching and learning improvement efforts. But what does it mean for a public bureaucracy such as a school district central office and its central office administrators to ‘learn?’” (p. 629). In other words, what does it mean for a system that is designed to be regulatory and compliance driven to adopt a different culture? How does it happen? Will PPS show itself to be adaptive and flexible in this pursuit?

While fully addressing these questions is outside the feasible range of this project, in order to carry out my principal support and interest in cultural change, my work will inevitably have implications for organizational learning. This cross-fertilization includes gathering information on the degree to which PPS is a learning organization already, and

whether there is potential for me to use my informal authority in this setting to inject some structures that will move the organization in this direction in even small ways.

Figure 2: The multilevel instructional core.



Summary

The role the assistant superintendent plays in supporting the instructional leadership of principals in PPS is the central topic of this capstone project. This priority stems from the increasingly recognized idea in the field that systemic changes in teaching and learning require principals to build adaptive and communal approaches to instructional leadership that are themselves rarely systemic. Yet because the central office and the schools are inextricably linked, what I understand and what my experience of

system-level change lead me to know is that we cannot respond to this issue with principals alone. Addressing this need must simultaneously consider how the central office develops its own culture and mindset toward this pressing adaptive challenge, and the degree to which it strives to become a learning organization as it supports its principals.

As we know, talented and independent leaders can and do create pockets of schools that are successful. Yet for system-level transformation to take place, the central office must be transformed into an adaptive learning organization so that new values can be modeled for principals, who in turn will reflect them in their schools. This multilevel consideration of coherence is essential: if we only work on the school level, any change will not be sustainable. To effectively support principals sustainably and systemically—as principals are critical to district-wide achievement—the entire system has to begin to operate differently. It will ultimately require a reorientation of the district central office, whereby the leaders there begin to make a habit of studying and learning from their actions and responding in ways that reflect their continuous learning. Nevertheless, I understand that these types of changes are large scale and in many cases are beyond the scope of this project. Still, as a team member, it is important not to account only for the impact I have on those in my care, on whom I expect to have a significant impact, but to also have a vision for how my work will help bring necessary changes to the larger organization through interactions and collaborations with my colleagues and superiors. Thus, knowing that cultural transformation is needed at the district level in PPS, I have accounted for my role in it in this project's intentions, along with the expectations from the pilot of state-of-the-art approaches to supporting principals in PPS.

In the end, through a review of the most relevant research and theory, the experience of districts pioneering such efforts, and my own experiences, I have landed on the working theory of action below.

Theory of Action

If Pittsburgh Public Schools...

- Shift the role of the principal supervisor from primarily overseeing compliance mandates to coaching principals to engage in a process of inner and outer work to enhance their adaptive and instructional leadership repertoires
- Supports principals in forming communities of practice among their peers
- Uses assistant superintendents as boundary-crossing search agents
- And takes steps toward becoming a learning organization, cultivating continuous learning and reflective leadership practices among central office executives

Then

- A coherent structure of organizational teams focused on continuous improvement of learning, teaching, and leadership will develop across every level of the school system, with a substantially increased capacity to create and sustainably improve learning outcomes for students.

Strategic Project

Goals for the Project

This project is ultimately a response to two related problems of practice in PPS: the need to (a) promote a culture of agency and trust with regard to principal/central office relations in efforts to (b) improve student achievement and increase racial equity across the district schools. Based on the previously stated theoretical frameworks and the guiding theory of action, I took a threefold approach in this capstone project:

1. To pilot a principal support initiative that informed PPS district leadership's efforts to restructure its approach to supporting principals as instructional leaders, with emphasis on creating a clear pathway between the principal's instructional leadership and the instructional practices in the classroom.
2. To specifically inform the central office's approach to redefining the role of the assistant superintendent, which included using more adaptive approaches to supporting and supervising principals in their personal mastery work and their development as instructional leaders, and to illustrate the connections between the assistant superintendents' support for principals and the instructional practices that principals oversee.
3. To use my informal authority and relationships with central office executive leaders to model and be an agent for cultural change at the district level.

The principal support work, which was the core of this project, sought to engage a cohort of seven principals in a dual process of inner and outer work (Wagner & Kegan, 2006). The inner-work component of my project was meant to create an opportunity for

these leaders to deepen their understanding of themselves through such activities as reconnecting with their stories, their sense of purpose, personal leadership styles, and becoming consciously aware of their immunity to change and the undergirding mindset. At the same time, this project also created opportunities for these seven principals to use their increasing self-understanding to practice and develop their instructional leadership skills. The outer work of cultivating instructional leadership was designed to support the principals in simultaneously developing their behavioral skills of observing, analyzing, and understanding teaching and learning in ways that informed their decisions about how to manage and support learning in their schools.

Meanwhile, recognizing that the principal support efforts might not be replicable or sustainable without certain adaptations and support in the governing central office, as Part 2 of my bifurcated approach I implemented a key strategy for working with the central office in a boundary-crossing capacity to leverage school-level support efforts toward the needed cultural change at the central office (Honig, 2008). This portion of the project was also designed to push the boundaries of the compliance culture that existed in the central office, and I argue that central office leaders are only capable of supporting principals in these adaptive ways if they themselves embrace a culture of continuous learning. The specific data collection, goals, activities, and assessments associated with these initiatives are described below.

Project Narrative and Data Collection

The principal support portion of this project was designed to be tailored and flexible, as guided by the participants' different needs. The seeds of participant identification were initially sown during individual meetings Dr. Lane and I held with

principals in the fall of 2013. Given the highly interpersonal nature of the work and the relatively short timeframe of the project, participants were purposefully sampled to maximize engagement and benefit along the following dimensions: (1) rapport with the superintendent and myself during individual meetings; (2) reputation for commitment and a solid work ethic; (3) expressed comfort with data use; (4) strong leadership presence; (5) in charge of an underperforming school; (6) multiple years with the district; and (7) multiple years at their school, if possible. The ideal candidate was essentially an experienced and stable leader from a low-performing school who seemed poised and competent. Under Dr. Lane's guidance, I invited eight principals to participate, seven females and one male. The male ultimately declined due to serious medical issues, leaving no males in the sample. This limitation is discussed in the analysis section. Sample demographics for the participating principals are presented in Table 2. The central office portion of this project generally consisted of strategic approaches to working experiences and thus required no selective sampling.

Two other design factors were implemented based on other effective principal support models. First, this group was smaller than the caseload for current assistant superintendents, who supervise approximately 25 principals each. The number used here draws from principal support research suggesting that 8 to 12 is ideal (CGCS, 2013). After one participant cancelled, the group was left with 7, just shy of the low end of the ideal range but still allowing for quality relationships and coaching. Second, there was no formal evaluation component connected with participation in this group, which allowed for unencumbered relationships between the supervisor and principals. Implications for these designs are discussed below.

Table 2: Principal Group Demographics

Principal Experience	Experience at Current School	Race	Age	Gender	School Performance
3-12 years (6.0 Avg.)	1-5 years (2.7 Avg.)	5 Black 2 White	36-45 years	7 Women 0 Men	All in bottom 15% of schools in the state

My data-collection approaches were adapted from the Luma Institute (2012) and were as follows:

- Observation of principals in their school environments
- Focus group interview
- Participant journaling
- Mixed questioning survey of principals, with open-ended and quantifiable data
- Open-ended survey of district executive cabinet
- Collection of artifacts (relevant agendas, emails, minutes, etc.)

I analyzed the data for both theory-driven and newly emerging themes. Theory-driven themes were those that reflected the literature included in the review of knowledge for action. I also considered new themes were if they were consistent across multiple data points and sources.

Bifurcated Strategy Part 1: Principal Support Component

The principal support work started with the identification of the adaptive competences, skills, and attitudes that principals need to have and be able to do to be effective instructional leaders. The most essential competencies, abilities, and traits are listed in Table 3, reflecting the Knowing, Doing, and Being Organizing framework (EdLD, 2011). The design elements of the initiative are described below.

Table 3: The Know, Be, Do Framework for Principal Support

Know...	Do...	Be...
Understanding the self	Reflecting on practice	Changing internally, acting externally
Being aware of undergirding mindsets	Questioning assumptions	Believing that they have the power to provide meaningful learning for the children and adults in their schools
	Seeking feedback from multiple sources	
Having a theory of learning	Leading courageous conversations with teacher teams to get to their behaviors and mindsets as well	Being autonomous and self-authoring in the face of compliance demands
Being able to diagnose barriers to achievement in their own schools	Becoming a risk-taker	Being vulnerable
Knowing how to lead for racial equity	Engaging and inspiring teacher teams as a critical unit for learning	Having clarity on one's core values
	Creating pathways from leadership to impacting classroom instruction	

One-to-one coaching. Whitmore (2004) defines coaching as “unlocking a person’s potential to maximize their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them” (p. 10). In that vein, the coaching component of this project focused on adult development principles. Ultimately, the goal of these 1:1 coaching sessions was to, as Kegan (ITC Training, 2013) would say, support the principals in increasing their capacity to see more deeply into themselves and into their organization. This coaching

work also utilized the collaborative concept of “joint work” (Honig et al., 2010), a reciprocal practice that calls for starting with the principal’s questions or problems to anchor the work, and then sharing mutual accountability for the principal’s development. In developing my coaching models, I drew not only from the literature informing this study but also from coaching strategies outlined in the *EdLD Coaching Handbook* (Harvard Graduate School of Education [HGSE], 2012), which emphasize continuous improvement and reflective debriefing.

Community of practice. Essential to this project was the notion that learning is collaborative and, in this case, that it can emerge from lateral learning in communities of practice (Wenger, 2000). A community of practice is a collegial group of people who are together because of their mutual engagement that “combines doing, talking, feeling and belonging. It involves our whole person, including, our bodies, minds, emotions, and social relations” (p. 56). These groups offer safe spaces in which members can work to improve their practice without judgment or consequences. This is a powerful experience in that “participants shape each other’s experiences of meaning and in doing so they recognize something of themselves in each other” (p. 56).

The professional learning community in this case actually sought to change the nature of learning for principals. This gave the principals a forum in which to reflect on their practice and to engage others in constructive dialogue in order to continually improve their effectiveness. This approach was essentially a strategy to establish a new collaborative culture in the schools, one that focused on continuous improvement as a new way of working and learning together. Part of my strategy in investing in the establishment of communities of practice was to think of this pilot as enduring, since

principals are intrinsically motivated to organize and participate in these communities. Moreover, participating on such a team would give them firsthand experience of the kind of lateral learning experiences they could then help establish among their teachers.

Finally, this effort created a community that not only learned together but acted together—members who believed in and invested in each other, and who had a commitment to improving the way they support student and adult learning in their schools and to acting collectively to have an impact on the district as a whole. Table 4 outlines the timeline of specific activities associated with the inner, outer, and technical support I provided for participants.

Bifurcated Strategy Part 2: Central Office Culture Component

In my roles as a principal supporter, cabinet member, and contributor to various executive committees, I strategically modeled and facilitated steps toward the central office becoming a learning organization as a way to ensure the sustainability of the principal support work. My role as a boundary-spanner allowed me to gather information and evidence as to what principals might need, and on how that need might not match the existing central office's structures and ability to fulfill them. Initiatives for the central office segment of the project included the following:

- Using the information I got from the search process with principals to suggest better support and understanding of issues principals were facing
- Building trusting relationships that allowed me to offer input during cabinet meetings and to facilitate some segments

- Supporting the cabinet group in developing a more transparent decision-making process, with the hope of building trust and using time more efficiently
- Instituting a short feedback cycle or improvement loop with a plus/delta protocol so that we were able to reflect and encourage learning

Thus, although I did not have formal authority at the central office, I had a seat at the table that enabled me to use my relationships with others as a lever for cultural change (Fullan, 2001). As discussed above, Elmore (2004) notes that “cultures do not change by mandate. They change by the specific displacement of existing norms, structures, and processes by others” (p. 11). Elmore goes on to discuss the importance of modeling the new behaviors that are to replace the old ones, and in this project I sought to model relationships over anonymity, connections over silos, and to introduce a process for joint decision-making that would displace the behind-door, ambiguous decision-making practices that eroded trust among the staff. Moreover, I sought to demonstrate that collective reflection and short feedback loops facilitate continuous learning and improvement while displacing inertia.

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Table 4: Principal Support Project Development

	Phase 1 (Nov.-Dec. 2013)	Phase 2 (Jan.-Feb. 2014)	Phase 3 (Mar. 2014-)
Adaptive: Inner Work (Mindsets)	Coaching • Vision alignment • Reflection, after action reviews • Diagnosing personal strengths and challenges • Reflection, journaling • Developing story of self/racial autobiography • Strengths finder Community of Practice • Courageous conversations about race protocols and norms	Coaching • Not doing only what you know, leaning into discomfort, especially when it's instructional • Naming fears and assumptions Community of Practice • Moving toward what you fear most • Listening, inference ladder • Improvement goal-setting: persona	Coaching • Coherence along professional development goals • Leadership goal-setting: plan, enact, react/debrief • MBTI Community of Practice • Boundary-crossing tools—RISE/managed curriculum, hindrances, and supports • Immunity to change MOOC
Adaptive: Outer Work (Behavior)	Coaching • Authentically connecting with those you want to impact through stories of self Community of Practice • Forming their own community of practice • Supporting teacher learning and growth in teams focused on instructional practice	Coaching • Diagnosing strengths and challenges of your school • Capacity-building • Improvement goal-setting: school Community of Practice • Reading “Change Leadership” • Traveling to NYC to expand our collective vision of what is possible for teaching and learning	Coaching • Continuation of previous activities • Judicious appropriation of policy requirements (curriculum mandates, teacher evaluation tools, etc.) Community of Practice • Collaboration with other leaders—whom do you trust? Allies? Challengers? • Peer coaching • Conflict resolution styles • Making sense of reified tools/boundary objects
Technical: Structures	Coaching • Teacher teams— who meets, for what, how often? • Use of professional development time • Managing 1:1 teacher feedback sessions • Classroom observation and write-ups Community of practice: N/A	Coaching • Use of time • Managing your calendar • Restructuring your office for collaborative conversations Community of Practice • N/A	Coaching • Ad hoc technical needs Community of Practice • N/A

Coaching Approach Variation in 1:1 Coaching versus Central Office

In my work with principals, my formal authority allowed me to enter the work with the self-examination of mindsets as a key lever to meeting adaptive challenges. With the central office, however, given my informal authority status, my entry-point strategy was to tackle structures and behaviors rather than mindsets. Because changing one's mindset demands so much self-exploration, it requires both authorization and consent to be effective. I did not have the leverage to do this in my central office role, so with my informal, less direct authority, I used the more indirect approach of modeling and engaging repeatedly in positive new behaviors (e.g., decision protocols, reflective cycles, and feedback loops with the cabinet; HGSE, 2012). Using any of these effectively requires specific core competences, including developing trusting relationships, listening, giving, and receiving feedback, withholding judgment, and understanding that change requires addressing old patterns, blind spots, and/or areas of vulnerability (HGSE, 2012).

Critical Moments

As noted above, the principal support initiative was spawned in the individual meetings Dr. Lane and I had with principals throughout the district. After initiating this project, the participating principals were extremely receptive to this work. There was a clear hunger for a different, more strengths-based approach to supporting their personal and professional development, and the project proceeded as detailed in Table 4. A particularly memorable experience occurred in the form of a trip to New York City, which took place because at some point I realized that we needed a shared experience in which the level of conversation would be based on the principals seeing and experiencing a new environment in which students were

actively engaged, teachers were engaged in focused and deep learning, and principals were empowered. We found this very situation in our visits to schools in New York, and it was an especially memorable experience for the principals involved.

Table 5: District-Level Project Development

District-Level Activities and Phases		
Phase 1: (July-September 2013)	Phase 2 (October-December 2013)	Phase 3 (January 2014-)
• Member of Executive Cabinet Leadership Team • Relationship-building • Gaining trust • Learning and inquiry • Facilitating meetings • Giving feedback • One-to-one meetings with superintendent	• Member of District Equity Leadership Team • Member of the Envisioning and Strategic Priorities office • Utilizing short feedback loop protocols • Utilizing post-meeting reflection Plus/Delta Protocol • Utilizing effective meeting agenda-building protocols • Decision-making protocols • Modeling, disrupting • Cross-functional teamwork • Attending support model meetings • School support model implementation and modification	• Build authority to do more explicit cultural work

Upon returning from New York, the participants found it deeply gratifying to share their experiences with senior leaders and have them respond with a commitment to incorporate the feedback into operations. Thus the trip fulfilled one of the main functions of this group. Ultimately, the district leaders authorized the community of practice to stand in place of—rather than in addition to—the mandated district-level meetings. This encouraging action was symbolic of the central office’s responsiveness and its integration of new approaches based on the principals’ needs—which is what I hope this project will inspire in other school leaders and in central office reform.

Other important highlights of the project included the moment during Phase 2 when I shared my own immunity to change, just before I invited the principals to engage in their own goal-setting and Immunity to Change mapping. Doing so helped us turn a significant corner as a team, moving us toward more intensive collaboration and deeper commitment to the group. The group continued to evolve in its closeness and openness, as demonstrated by members' increasing comfort in talking to each other about potentially contentious issues, such as White privilege. At the district level, there continued to be indicators like that described above for movement in the search process and district-level changes based on principal feedback. People were also increasingly engaged with and committed to the feedback loops. Overall, however, having an impact on cultural change with only informal authority proved to be a slow process at best. The project outcomes are described in detail in the results and analysis sections.

Results

Current Stages of the Project

Principal project. The principal project is currently in the third stage of implementation. Although the phases of this project are in many ways fluid and a number of activities are ongoing, embarking on this third phase meant concluding two prior phases of the project. In phase one, the emphasis for the community of practice was on strengths-based inner work, as well as establishing an environment of trust, respect, and lateral learning within the group. In phase two, the emphasis was on being vulnerable in a process of shared self-assessment, while the individual inner-work focus was on addressing personal barriers and limitations, such as challenging one's assumptions and mental models. Regarding individual outer work, the principals were led through the process of developing a theory of how children and adults learn best, which in phase three will in turn eventually lead to making an instructional diagnosis and school-based goal-setting.

In this third stage of implementation, the community of practice is focused on mutual support, whose key elements include (1) peer coaching; (2) sharing material resources across their schools; (3) sharing strategies for how to negotiate the use of district tools and mandates; and (4) developing collective power to stand with agency in advocating for central office support that would be more to useful to teaching and learning efforts district-wide. Individually they are being coached through processes of (1) setting personal improvement goals; (2) developing coherence across support levels; (3) developing personal empowerment in face of district priorities; and (4) planning to

organize and manage their schools around their instructional diagnosis and newly established learning theories. Across all phases, the project activities are within a framework of reflective process that considers actions they have taken as leaders. They critically examine the consequences of those actions, evaluate and analyze the beliefs that underpinned their behaviors, and take an active role in acquiring new knowledge that will help to modify and adapt their specific approaches in future similar situations, while also modifying their overall practice. Thus the work of this project is ongoing, with future phases dependent on emerging outcomes.

Central office project. The central office project is also in its third phase of implementation. The first phase was a learning and inquiry phase that consisted of observation, building relationships, and vigilant engagement. The goal was to establish myself as a credible and collegial team member, and also to understand the network of roles and stakeholders in the organization. In the second phase, I fully embedded myself in the culture. I took a more active role in the work of the central office, in which I continued to cultivate relationships and strengthen connectivity, served cross-functionally across offices, and entered a space of reciprocal mentoring with Superintendent Lane. At that time, I also began using increased informal authority, credibility, and professional courage to employ strategies geared toward creating cultural shifts in the central office. These strategies included (1) modeling values; (2) advocating for the institution of reflective practices as a norm; (3) using my boundary-spanning role and the search process to highlight patterns and experiences across schools that had implications for district-level decision-making and culture; (4) advocating for the practice of transparency

in decision-making; and (5) building alliances around the adaptive work of cultural change.

Currently, in addition to continuing with phase two practices, the third phase of this project is building on that work in emphasizing (1) building more formal and informal authority to do more explicit work on cultural change; (2) increasing collaboration with allies on change management; (3) reflecting on success and failure to date in a process of strategizing for future activities; and (4) exemplifying increased professional courage and risk-taking. As with the principal support project, the central office work is ongoing and evolving.

Results to Date

Principal support. Principal support outcomes are best understood through relevant theoretical frameworks presented in the review of knowledge for action, including social learning theory and adult learning and development. Results presented here have been triangulated across several data sources, including quantitative and qualitative survey responses, a principal focus group, participant and facilitator journals, artifacts of communication and documentation, meeting notes, and the facilitator's observations of principals' work context and performance. Multiple examples from these sources are provided whenever possible.

Also, while it is too early in the project to expect or accurately detect gains in student achievement based on this adaptive intervention with principals, this project is founded on approaches that are demonstrated to be common practices of effective school leaders and teams and, in many cases, directly tied to improved student achievement.

Ultimately, when adults are engaged in continuous learning and improvement, strong

leaders and effective teacher teams become the cornerstones of high-achieving schools. We expect, therefore, the approaches used here to improve instructional leadership and teacher practice—the most important factors in student learning. Thus, showing progress toward these anchors is the goal of this project in its current phase.

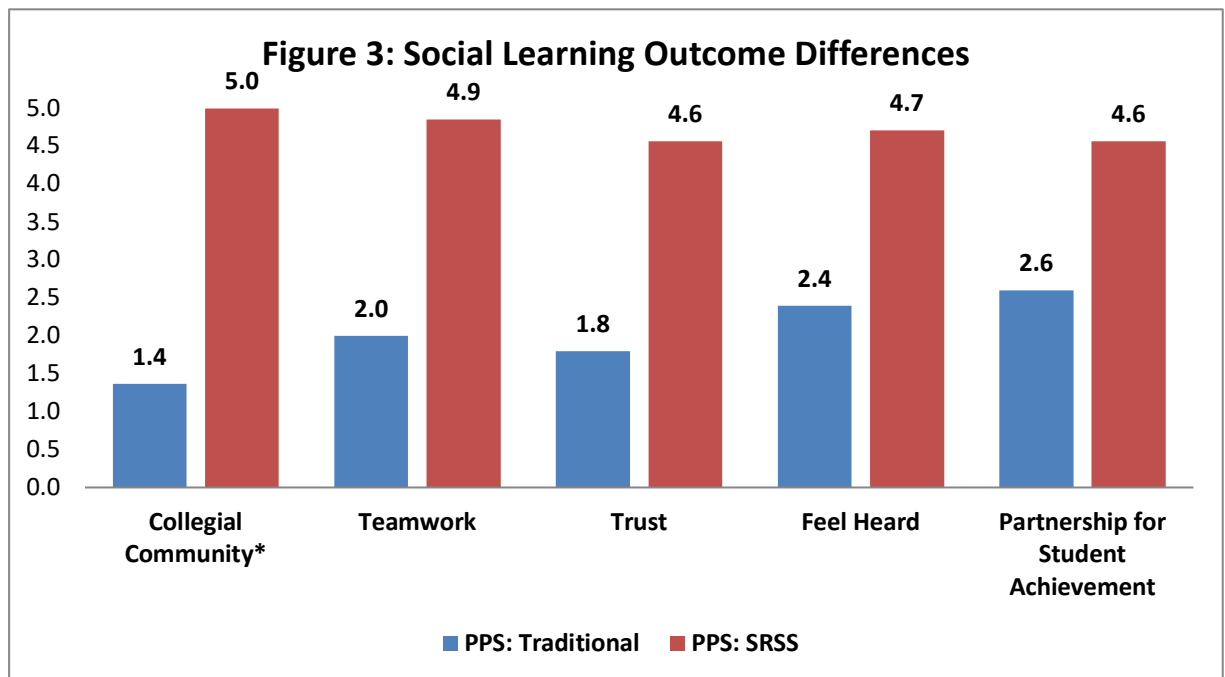
Social learning theory outcomes. The community of practice was the main vehicle for bringing social learning to the group, and overall findings to date seem to suggest that the project has been successful in cultivating a strong sense of community among the principals. With regard to forming communities, results suggest that trust, lateral learning, teamwork, interconnectedness, supportive communication, and shared goals have been emerging between members. These findings are evident across multiple data sources, including the principals' individual open-ended survey responses, focus group discussions, and in quantified survey data relating to these practices.

For example, when asked what was unique about the Self-Reflecting Soul Sisters⁴ (SRSS) support relative to traditional support they had received, one respondent specifically cited issues of trust, safety, and openness: "Being with colleagues in SRSS that I can be honest with is truly a blessing. I can trust these ladies that they will not go back to someone in central telling about our fears and weaknesses. I don't feel exploited and afraid. I can ask for help. I can listen. I don't have to say things so that people think I am smart." These sentiments were consistent across the members. In fact, when asked generally about unique attributes of this model of instructional leadership support, four of seven respondents mentioned issues of trust and psychological safety specifically.

⁴ This was the name that principal participants eventually gave to the group.

Trust was also clearly expressed in the closed-ended survey results. When asked the degree to which they agreed that SRSS had an environment of trust, respondents on average answered a 4.9 on a 5-point scale (Figure 3). This scale of response represents a dramatic improvement; when asked the same question last fall, district principals' average response was only 1.8 out of 5 (PPS, 2013). Measures of teamwork in SRSS and the central office were similar (4.9 at SRSS versus 2.0 in central office). Additionally, when asked about feelings of collegiality at SRSS and in prior principal support initiatives in the district, SRSS group members' ratings averaged 5 out of 5; these same members rated their previous district experiences of collegiality at 1.4 out of 5.

Issues of trust and safety were mentioned repeatedly in the focus group discussions as well, where individuals indicated that the community's level of trust and openness were not just present but helpful. For example, when the group was asked generally how things were going in the community, one respondent noted, "I don't know



what would have happened had we not had this group and the trust we're starting to build with each other." In response to that comment another said, "I felt a sense of the fact that people are so transparent. That has helped to strengthen me." Many others expressed similar feelings, and thus we see that community members felt that trust and safety were both deeply present and helpful to their practice. Moreover, across three different data sources, we see that the level of trust, openness, and safety in SRSS—qualities that are important to making a community of practice effective (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2013; see also Bryk et al., 2010)—was high, relative to these participants' previous experiences, and also substantially higher than district averages in these areas. These qualities in themselves were considered valuable to the principals' performance as well.

The value the principals put on these community attributes is particularly important, since one might argue that trust and teamwork in and of themselves are truly valuable when they contribute to professional learning and improve practice. Thus there was consensus among the principals that community membership was beneficial to both their focus on and performance in instructional leadership. When asked, for example, if there was a sense of partnership was between their school and the SRSS and toward improving student achievement, SRSS members averaged 4.6 out of 5 in their level of agreement. By contrast, when PPS principals were asked the same question about the central office, the average level of agreement was only 2.6 out of 5.

In addition to this sense of partnering to improve student achievement, members specifically cited the sense of openness and transparency as a source of their own improved practice. As one focus group respondent said when comparing her vulnerability in this group to previous district support initiatives:

I think we have to be vulnerable first. And this is what the group has helped me to be, vulnerable. Because for me, I don't care what anybody says, the [central office visits] were [a] dog and pony show. Showed them what I felt they wanted to see. And when [the SRSS facilitator] comes in, you want to see it all. Just see it all. Give me honest feedback and talk to me. And it causes me to be very reflective about my practice and where my shortcomings are. And to expose those shortcomings so I can get better at what I do. Whereas before, I'm going to hold all my shortcomings to myself and not share them with anybody . . . now I have seven other people I can share that with and get some feedback on . . . I love that vulnerability. Being able to be myself. Expose my practice and not be condemned in doing it. About where my shortcomings are in doing that. Pushing my thinking with my teachers and how to deal with them to push them to the next level.

This way of mirroring practices on the school level was common across respondents. Another principal noted that she has modeled takeaways from the group in her own instructional leadership to the benefit of her students:

I am more deliberate in our meeting times to talk about instructional issues and to have teachers reflect on their practice with each other. We have to be able to challenge each other to grow . . . We as a staff have so much openness now that we want to be honest about what we do. We know that this honesty only makes our school better for kids. Being with colleagues in SRSS that I can be honest with is truly a blessing.

Still another participant remarked how the work of the group has inspired her to develop similar work with her own staff, which is taking hold already. She noted that "I'm seeing

like just little glimpses here and there of teachers asking teachers for other ideas and holding each other accountable. It's not so much for me anymore, but they're actually starting to do it with each other."

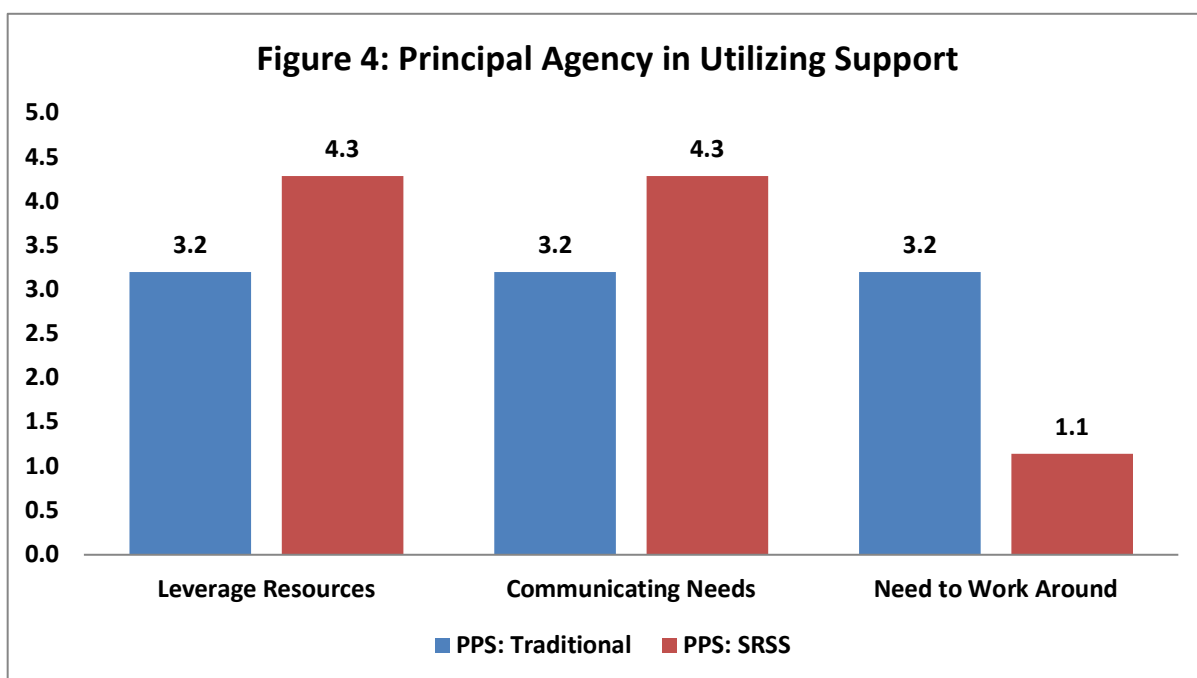
Several other mechanisms beyond safety and trust were noted as reasons why these practices might be improving, including sharing resources, and lateral learning and accountability. This benefit of lateral learning and the associated concept of sharing knowledge is typified by a respondent who said, "Working with strong administrators also supports growth, as it provides space for us to learn from each other and develop ideas. The other element that has been good is that this high-level learning and work is being completed in a low-stakes environment." Also of particular importance to the performance-enhancing elements of a community of practice is the negotiation of meaning around district tools, forms, or mandates, which Wenger (2000) refers to collectively as "reified tools." Principals in the community of practice noted that the group created a space for increasing understanding, effective use, and the appropriation of district tools, forms, and mandates, as necessary. One principal noted that the SRSS was helpful in making sense of district requirements, even when they didn't seem immediately helpful: "I try to make connections where possible and I ask questions when I do not see the connections."

In addition to making sense of district mandates, community members commonly discussed how the group helped them bridge the tension between their local needs and what was being required by the district when the two were not aligned, as one respondent noted:

Before the SRSS I would go crazy trying to do everything that the district required administrators to do. Often time what they asked us to do did not and does not positively impact outcomes for kids. Incidents would be like completing the PULSE collection, RISE evidence collection, State School Improvement Plan, and the Principal's PLP, and the IQAC window all at the same time . . . Now with the SRSS, I tell my supervisor that I need more time and I get to that stuff when I have a minute. My primary focus is my students and the type of instruction that my teachers deliver.

Thus, the principals' community of practice benefited its members by providing an opportunity for sense-making and lateral learning in terms of support for the implementation of the district's reified tools, including helping each other appropriate their application in their schools as necessary.

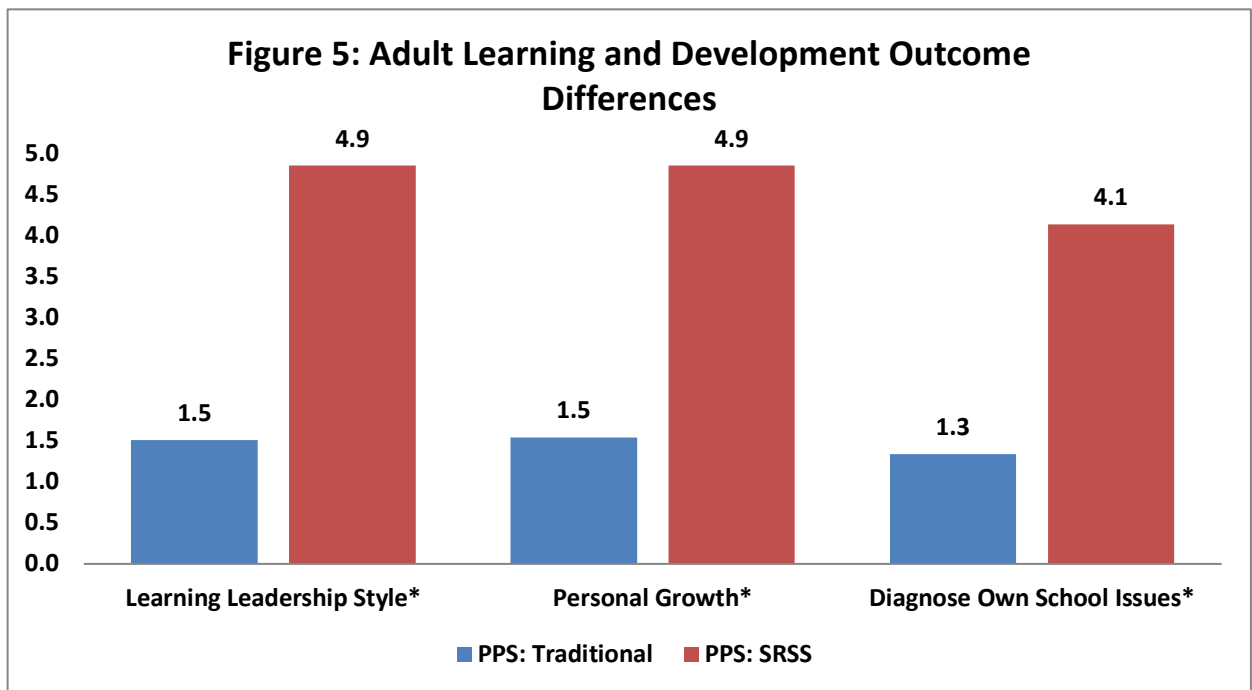
Finally, with regard to communities of practice, principals in SRSS were more likely to report that they took the initiative to use the group as a resource than the general principal population did the central office, particularly in terms of leveraging the group's resources and communicating needs to their SRSS principal supervisor. They also were less likely to report feeling the need to work around SRSS requirements than their peers who reported on central office support. These results are demonstrated in Figure 4.



Adult learning and development outcomes. The environment of safety and trust created by the community of practice also contributed to the potential for adult learning in the principal project. In fact, the PPS teacher coaching manual notes that a particularly effective strategy for adult learning is the creation of a “holding environment,” which they define as one that “supports and challenges different learners and makes them feel safe to take risks” (p. 1). One-to-one coaching was another major vehicle for fostering adult learning and development outcomes. To date these include knowing one’s own strengths and limitations as a leader, questioning one’s assumptions, and engaging in reflective practice. Adult development also includes concepts of agency, autonomy, and empowerment, with Kegan’s (2009) concept of “self-authoring” as a developmental goal for school leaders. While a true shift from the socialized self to the self-authoring developmental stage was beyond the scope of this program, evidence of increased autonomy and empowerment in this work was seen as a critical outcome, particularly in

the face of a culture of compliance and the associated dependent behaviors that Fullan (1997) has described.

Generally, principals felt that the support SRSS provided in adult learning and development had a much higher value than the support they had previously received from PPS. Figure 5 shows that, in terms of learning about their leadership style, experiencing personal growth, and diagnosing their own school issues, the principals felt that the current program had



dramatically greater impact. These findings are supported by artifact evidence as well.

One respondent, Robin, noted in an email communication that the strengths-finder activity was enlightening and novel in her leadership experience:

I went home and read part 1 of the book and took the assessment. I must say that when I saw the results, I said that's not me. However, when I read the descriptions

provided, I was able to find myself in them. I just have never had this perspective before regarding focusing on my strengths and really didn't realize what my strengths were . . . My Top 5 Strengths: 1 Developer 2 Connectedness 3 Arranger 4 Learner 5 Empathy.

Jane also found value in the strengths identification:

I thought that was a really great place to start with, self-assessment. And really try to unpack and develop an understanding and knowledge of self. Where are you at this starting point? To have a clearer picture of where you want to go . . .

Responsibility was number one for me. And that speaks exactly to my leadership style. You know, assuming responsibility for everything and everyone.

There was consensus among the participants that self-assessment around strengths and personal assets was key to their development, and to the validating norms and behaviors they should continue.

Respondents also described experiencing growth by diagnosing and understanding the limiting mindsets and how they affect their leadership practice. As one principal noted:

For me I just think, just awareness . . . For the first time ever I've had to think about how my own inadequacies as a human and as a leader impact my school.

And I've never actually thought about that. I've been okay to say, "I don't know."

I don't try to lead with "I have all the answers and I'm the best principal," but I've never actually said to myself, "Oh, you can't stand conflict. So you either bulldoze over people, so they're scared enough not to fight you, or you totally

avoid it and let them off the hook. You don't even have a way to get in there for the happy medium." So that, just that little thing has been huge for me.

Jane also described her limitations:

I forget that I need to hone in on one particular thing. And we've talked about this, and you've helped me realize, too, like I don't necessarily have a focus because I'm doing too many things. But I realize in my own practice like I'm not good at details. Like I'm good at "this is what I see happening," but I need other people to do the details, because I often don't care about the details.

Here we see that Jane is beginning not only to recognize her limitations around focus and detail but also that she should surround herself in her leadership role with people who compliment her strengths and fill gaps in her competencies.

Participants reflected deeply on their strengths and limitation, which involved exploring their origins. As Robin noted, "I had to begin to even reflect on my childhood, my upbringing. I mean, we don't just end up this way, right? It comes from someplace." In this vein, notes from my own journal as facilitator describe participants investigating how issues of family culture, parenting experiences, previous professional experiences, and race have informed their current limiting mindsets. Overall, participants reported gaining self-understanding by diagnosing their own strengths and limitations as leaders, and also that they believed this inner work was improving their instructional leadership.

In addition to reflecting on their strengths, limitations, and informing experiences, the principals have begun to infuse elements of their own personal and racial biographies, or stories of self, into their practice to authentically connect, inspire, and motivate their teachers and their families (Ganz, 2011a). Ganz (2011b) notes that the power in the story

of self is in “motivating others to join you in action on behalf of a shared purpose” (p. 1), and several participants reported using their stories in this way. Charlotte described the impact of her story of race and economic challenges:

Sometimes to look at people, you don’t know what they’ve come through, what they’ve gone through. But it can give people so much strength and hope and motivation when you’re willing to share it and you can say how you got there. So I think the story of self is, especially with the work that we’re doing with these populations of kids—they don’t have to be Black. They can be any color. But I think it’s critical, it’s crucial . . . I think it’s always important to share that story of self.

Justice talked not only about getting more comfortable telling her story in the professional context but also about using her story to, in Ganz’s (2011b) words, “exercise agency under conditions of uncertainty” (p. 270):

I always try to turn that off when I’m turning on my positional authority . . . I always try to turn that off. But there have been a couple of examples where recently I tried to step into that . . . When an opportunity presented itself for me to argue, not argue, but push for wanting algebra for my students, I could have went to just the data and showing them the numbers, but I didn’t take that approach. It actually felt like it was draining but it felt like a relief to instead share my story as the example. And flesh that out as to why my students now, even though there’s only six of them, there were two, there are now six, deserve to have Algebra I in the eighth grade at [her school]. So I don’t know if the story was necessarily, was impactful. But change did happen. An email did go out to all principals that it was

mandatory that we had algebra and that the allocation should reflect it. So what did not exist for my kids this year will next year. I felt good about that.

Thus we see that these stories of self are empowering these leaders in two ways: (1) to motivate others in strength and hope through mutual connection; and (2) as a tool for advocacy and empowerment to benefit those in our care.

Finally, an important finding with regard to adult learning and development was growth in professional empowerment and autonomy, which seemed to displace the learned dependency that had dominated the district's compliance culture. Shannon reflected on this:

In the past, I have complied with things that I have been asked to do by central office administration, even if I was unsure of the impact that it would have on my students. I now approach directives with a keener eye to ensure that initiatives will meet the needs of my students.

Robin noted similarly that when faced with reified district tools and requirements, she now asks how it fits with her current organizational focus:

If this is your focus and this is where you want to go, how are you, how are you using that time to get there? And why are you having those meetings? Why am I doing this stuff? Am I doing it just because they told us we have to do it? And how is that benefiting and supporting the school? How are we going to roll this out? So it's causing me to be more focused and thoughtful on how to use that time with my teachers.

It's important to note a key distinction in Shannon's and Robin's comments on empowerment: it does not represent an "isolated autonomy" (Fullan, 1998), nor is it

demonstrated by maverick disregard or disorder relative to the larger organizational priorities. Such an approach would be counter to the idea of empowered principals working collaboratively toward district goals (Fullan, 1998). On the contrary, these responses fit Wagner and Kegan's (2006) discussion of how educational leaders take external risks by challenging the status quo of an educational organization. Wagner and Kegan go on to note how, as these participants demonstrate, "their actions first, however, often represent changes in their own beliefs and illustrate the significant transformation required for most leaders, and ultimately for everyone in the system" (p. 14). More precisely, they note the need for "calculated political risks" among educational leaders in a healthy school system. This necessary approach is illustrated in the quote above from Justice, who described her advocacy around algebra provisions—her empowerment resulted in positive district-wide change by increasing the provision of algebra for students.

Taken together, these results demonstrate that elements of both social learning theory and adult development were strongly evident in the principal project. Particularly noteworthy were the beneficial aspects of taking a strengths-based approach (e.g., using Strengths Finder, asset-based coaching, and observations) to diagnosing their leadership, which was complemented by a helpful examination of limiting mindsets. These approaches were part of a larger framework of inner and outer work, and together the principals demonstrated strong movement toward a more reflective practice. We also see that a holding environment was formed in which adult learners, in a social learning context, experienced levels of trust and safety that allowed for lateral learning, supportive communication, and teamwork. Moreover, the principals reported that the qualities of

their community of practice were not only personally meaningful but also influenced their practice of instructional leadership. This community of practice created a particular sense of partnership that allowed them to share knowledge, whereby they brought their experiences as principals to the negotiation of sense-making and the appropriation of central office mandates (Wenger, 2000). Principals also reported that the transparency in these negotiations has helped to break through the isolation they previously experienced. Finally, among the principals we also noted a shift from dependency to a voice of advocacy and empowerment. When combined with collaboration, we have an empowered group working cooperatively, which scholars have noted is a key to establishing the types of schools and systems that are likely to bring about transformation (Fullan, 1997).

Central office. As with principal support, the work of the central office can be interpreted through the relevant theoretical lenses discussed in the review of knowledge for action—in this case, organizational learning and change theory. Also like principal support, there are multiple data sources to corroborate conclusions, although there is more emphasis here on artifacts and documented actions. However, because most of the central office activities had implications for both theoretical frameworks, in this section I present the results as derived from the particular activities rather than by frameworks.

Search process and boundary-spanning. Results here suggest noteworthy success in the search process in terms of drawing evidence from the field to influence decisions made at the district level to create a more responsive approach to principal support. Initially one of the most promising aspects of the search process was that Dr. Lane was invested, even as a participant. In one instance we witnessed some questionable practices in elementary literacy instruction that were coupled with poor achievement

results. These findings caused us to convene the central office literacy coordinators to reassess policy around the use of literacy time. From that search experience, literacy ultimately was elevated to a primary component within the district's current Whole Child, Whole Community strategic plan. Other organizational adjustments resulting from those individual meetings were that the superintendent continued to prioritize relationship- building with principals, and socio-emotional needs were incorporated into the strategic plan. Overall, the search process started out strong, and Dr. Lane's participation was an important component of it.

Later, in my role as a principal supervisor and boundary-crosser, I was able to elevate several perspectives from the field to the level of the superintendent, which eventually led to additional organizational adjustments. The most visible example was a visit to successful schools in New York City, the need for which emerged from my day-to-day work with principals. The trip was made possible by Dr. Lane, who was responsive when I expressed the need for these visits. Her only concern was whether the principals thought the trip would be useful, and once assured of this she authorized the trip. This activity was not typical of principal supervisors' practices in PPS. Robin went so far as to call it "the best professional learning that I have had in all of my eight years as an administrator." Thus we see here the full search process in action: the boundary-crosser operated with credibility in both contexts, she elevated concerns from one to the other, and the process created an organizational adjustment in the form of the central office being more responsive to the principals' need; clearly they would not have known about this need if it had not been raised through my boundary-spanning role.

In a subsequent and related example of a successful search process, after returning from the New York trip I negotiated an opportunity for the principals to report in person what they had experienced in New York, and how it related to their current experiences as principals in PPS. This meeting was inspired by my close work with the principals, particularly by seeing how little they felt heard, known, and understood by the central office leadership. In response I asked for a meeting with senior leadership, and they agreed to meet with the group. The meeting was successful, and it made quite an impression on both the principals and the district leaders present. After the meeting, Dr. Lane took several actions to demonstrate that what she heard would be incorporated to bring changes in practice, including restructuring the principals' quarterly meeting to create more opportunities for them to be and feel heard, and making the district's horizontal meetings optional. Several principals felt this was evidence of their emerging voice in the district, as one noted:

I really think that that is a perfect indication of the group's voice being heard in a powerful way without yelling, without screaming, without demeaning, belittling. Just speaking our truth. And coming across in such a way that it impacted change for principals. So I feel confident in the voice of our work.

Along with hope, however, came skepticism about the power and safety of exercising this emerging voice with the central office, even after the New York trip, as Evabella noted:

I still don't know that I feel like I have a voice. I still pretty much feel like I'm not really known . . . So I am still afraid. But I've done smaller things, like I haven't stormed the castle, but I've done smaller things with other central office people

that have like emailed things. And I've said, this doesn't even make sense. And a number of people have heard me and taken my feedback. So I haven't done it, you know, like at the assistant superintendent or superintendent level, because I'm still afraid, to be honest.

Here we see that, while there is some hint of opportunities for more authentic vertical communication between the central office leadership and school leadership, a sustained effort at cultural change will still be needed to get to a point where the principals experience central office responsiveness as a norm over time and with fidelity. In this case, such a cultural transformation will likely earn the ongoing trust of principals, thereby strengthening the central office as a continually learning organization.

Several similar examples resulted from the search process, including Dr. Lane's pursuit of principal autonomy models based on principals' feedback in the New York meeting, and the adoption of this support initiative, which displaced other district support obligations that previously were mandatory. This meant the principals had to do both if they wanted to try this new experience. These search, retrieval, and incorporation processes speak to a shift in overall priorities, from a principal support practice that was more rooted in compliance checks to one rooted in the principle of adult learning. This search process is a key mechanism for organizational learning and cultural change, and in this case it represented a growing commitment to a philosophy of continual improvement in the central office.

Modeling and relationship-building. Schein (2010) comments on the role of relationships in culture: "At the core of every culture are assumptions about the proper way to relate to each other to make the group safe, comfortable and productive" (p. 149).

Boleman (2008) similarly notes that strong relationships are essential to organizational health: “Both individual satisfaction and organizational effectiveness depend heavily on the quality of interpersonal relationships” (p. 187). With these approaches in mind, part of my entrance and ongoing change strategies was to build and model relationships both collegially and cross-functionally as a general member of the central office staff, and also as a member of various teams, including the Equity Team, Envisioning Team, Executive Cabinet, and School Support Team. My goals were to plant what seeds I could for cultural change and organizational learning, and to build allies for the potential growth of this work.

To date I have built quality relationships with fellow district leaders that may hold promise for district-changing alliances. Janet, a cabinet member, said, “You have quickly earned the respect of myself and others. Your sense of urgency, coupled with your kind demeanor, are a surprising blend that uniquely positions you to be a catalyst for change.” As she noted, my kindness, competency, and urgency were compelling to her in determining my value and ultimately in forging a relationship. Another cabinet member noted my ability to bridge divides: “I’m learning from working with you. You’re a wise person proving your ability to bridge some of the cultural and trust-related gaps between various groups” (departments, schools/central office). Still another team member noted that she appreciated that I came in trying to “understand the culture by understanding the people . . . not seeking information just to critique but to truly understand.” When asked to respond directly to the value of my work, most of the other cabinet members had similar responses. Thus it seems that my efforts to develop relationships were well received and were seen by district leaders as potential instruments of change.

In terms of modeling transformational qualities, the results were similar. When asked if I had modeled characteristics or norms that that could improve the executive team's practice, one colleague noted, "You consistently model and advocate for becoming more of a learning organization, reflective, going slow to go fast, becoming more explicit about our values and 'meta' with our processes." Another responded, "Alison consistently notices how people are or not engaging in the meeting or decisions that are being made and then calls it out. She helps assure 'voice' for the Cabinet's individual members, which contributes to multiple perspectives being shared to reach a more informed decision." These quotes and others demonstrate that advocacy, reflection, and learning emerged and were thought to be a theme with significant impact. While it is unclear exactly how my relationship-building and modeling will lead to measurable organizational change, we do know these approaches are seen as change mechanisms in the literature. As Elmore (2011) says, such change requires "modeling the new values and behaviors that you expect to displace the existing ones," (p. 11). That much of the work is going well so far.

Meeting protocols. Elmore (2014) also notes that improving schools is not about making the default culture work better but that it requires "literally removing the processes, structures, and artifacts of one culture as well as the beliefs, behaviors, and predispositions that provide meaning for them, and replacing them with another" (p. 10). In this vein, as part of my central office project, I used my informal authority to introduce new practices into the organizational structure of the executive cabinet meetings. These practices became routine in terms of how we would (a) make decision-making processes more transparent, and (b) use a reflective feedback loop to help create a space for double-

loop learning. These practices were chosen because they have been identified in the literature as being important components of effective and learning-oriented teams.

It is fair to say that the overall results to date using these two approaches have been mixed. Most cabinet members believed that these two approaches did in fact recognize and/or meet a need in how the group operates, but whether these initiatives produced enduring change is not clear to participants. Of the decision-making protocol, one cabinet member noted, “I think the introduction of the decision-making protocol helped cabinet members realize that we did not have a systematic decision-making protocol in place. However, I think we still have a bit of work to do before the protocol is internalized.” Another noted the clear difference between having an impact on practice and meeting goals:

I think it’s begun to improve our “professional practice” by making us more intentional, conscious in some cases about how certain decisions will be made, but effectiveness to me means improving our outcomes as well as our practice. I don’t think we’ve improved practice to the point that I would say we are getting better outcomes as a team yet.

Members did comment that they found the learning reflection to be a valuable idea. Dr. Lane in fact noted that it had been effective, because a key to leadership is situating the self as a learner. There were, however, some questions about the functionality and prioritizing of the exercise, even though it was valuable as an idea. One cabinet member noted, “Sometimes, it’s difficult to build this time into our meetings, but it’s important for us to be explicit in thinking about our own thinking, somewhat along the lines of metacognition.” Another noted, “I think it is good discipline to reflect on this,

but we need to find a way to draw conclusions or make it more action oriented.”

Conversely, many team members did see immediate value in these activities and wanted to maintain them. However, the degree to which the participants valued the activity, and/or whether it would generate the kind of cultural shifts that result from a concerted effort to displace old practices with new ones, was less clear here than in other areas of this work.

Several of the central office initiatives had evidence of achieving desired outcomes. These included the search process, relationship building, and modeling the desired norms. The institution of reflective practices, however, was well received in some ways but is still a work in progress. We know that culture is difficult to transform, but in small ways, with informal authority, I attempted to introduce those two key practices into the weekly routines of the central office that would allow for transparent decision-making, as well as a process of group reflection. While this represented a behavioral change in practice, I am unsure whether the beliefs and predispositions that provide meaning for this process are fully understood. It also is not clear that there is buy-in from everyone. When I am absent from a meeting, I am not sure that facilitators take time to review and share how the previous week’s feedback was taken into consideration to help improve that meeting. Furthermore, the reflective feedback loop is often introduced as something “Alison likes to do,” so we do it, rather than it being presented as something the group finds useful to the cabinet’s learning. These results speak to the stubborn and fixed nature of culture, and while it’s not impossible to change, it does require both authorization and a simultaneous attack to remove and replace the process or structures we don’t want, and to uproot beliefs and predispositions that give them meaning.

Analysis

As a practice-based researcher, I took on the role of a principal supervisor and embedded myself in central office life. My interaction with school principals was the main unit of analysis. As previously noted in the results, the principal supervision was very effective in bringing about the kinds of personal and professional learning that supports adaptive leadership development. At the central office level, my efforts to introduce a concerted search process that was grounded in an organizational learning framework had several promising effects in terms of the potential to incorporate the learning into central office policy. In the central office, efforts to model and introduce reflective behavioral norms into the culture of the executive cabinet had value for participants and sparked their interest. However, to date these efforts have only scratched the surface in terms of influencing the cultural norms of the group's functionality. Below I examine why these results may have occurred, with particular attention to how elements of the strategic triangle—public value, operational capacity, and legitimacy and support (Moore, 1995)—and other influential elements facilitated the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the strategies implemented. These other elements include design components along with several important personal attributes related to my own experience, preferred leadership style, and interpersonal approach. At the conclusion of the section, I revisit the theory of action that guided this work and offer possible amendments based on the results and learning that occurred throughout the project. The leading theory of action is as follows:

If Pittsburgh Public Schools...

- Shift the role of the principal supervisor from primarily overseeing compliance mandates to coaching principals to engage in a process of inner and outer work that will enhance their adaptive and instructional leadership repertoires
- Support principals in forming communities of practice among their peers
- Use assistant superintendents as boundary-crossing search agents
- Take steps toward becoming a learning organization by cultivating continuous learning and reflective leadership practices among central office executives

Then

- A coherent structure of organizational teams focused on continuous improvement of learning, teaching, and leadership will develop across every level of the school system, with a substantially increased capacity to create and sustainably improve learning outcomes for students.

What Worked: Catalysts of Successful Strategies

Urgency and timing. Moore (1995) discusses an initiative's public value as being critically important to its success. Superintendent Lane reflected this idea just before the start of this project at PPS, when she felt an urgent need to be responsive to the principals' survey results discussed earlier. Before this project began, Dr. Lane held focus groups and participated in her own search process by meeting principals in their schools and hosting meetings with them at the central office. Other responses presented more short-term and technical programming changes, such as rethinking how leadership week and principal quarterly meetings were conducted. But the principal search process we conducted together was also pointing us toward a deeper level of work that needed to be

part of a sustained effort. I believe Dr. Lane recognized that this pilot project would offer a new value proposition—specifically, a different brand of response to an urgent situation—and she was interested in studying its impact as a possible way to learn what could be applied at a systemic level. Ultimately, the urgency of the situation helped facilitate the success of the principal supervision aspect of the bifurcated strategy.

Meanwhile, the appetite for this kind of work among the principals was another important factor for the program’s success. I started this work at a time when many principals seemed to be feeling some level of discomfort, mismatch, or marginality in their position within the PPS school district. The negative evidence of this in the surveys suggested to me that the principals were crying out for a different kind of central office approach to support—one that was authentic, personal, and genuine, rather than distant and hierarchical. Without knowing exactly what to do but having the authorization to do something different along with my leadership experience, contextual understandings, and familiarity with educational reform research, I felt this would be a good opportunity to experiment with some ideas of inner and outer work to see if there was an appetite for it among the principals. I soon discovered that there definitely was. The elements of this project that emphasized voice, advocacy, and agency also tapped into the principals’ impulses and desires for new avenues through which to speak and be heard.

Lastly, the urgency and appetite the principals were demonstrating were perhaps fueled by an ongoing but unmet desire for deep reflection in service of self-improvement, learning, and stretching. As principal Charlotte stated, “For me, this work has been invigorating . . . it’s that jolt that you need to encourage you and inspire you to go on. And it’s been really exciting becoming a learner again.” Thus, in the context of the

challenges they were facing in their schools and in the district, the principals' appetite and sense of urgency at the start of the project made this work both well timed and very appealing to them. Ultimately, these factors set the principal project up to be effective.

Leadership buy-in. When considering the legitimacy and support the program needed to be successful (Moore, 1995), a key factor in the success of both the principals and the central office was the support they received from Dr. Lane. From the beginning, Dr. Lane fully supported me on the principal venture. Even before my project started, she included me on every individual principal visit and had me be the point person who scheduled and conducted the introductory calls. Those initial contacts with the principals were a wonderful way of setting the stage for the visits, because while my connection to Dr. Lane gave me credibility and status in the hierarchy, it was also a time for me to chat with them more informally and set the tone for the meetings. Her authorization of this role, even before the principals were selected for the pilot, helped to build a strong foundation for these relationships and would eventually prove essential to the success of the principal project.

Dr. Lane bought into the ideas of the principal project and also my ability to carry them out, as evidenced in the autonomy and flexibility she afforded me and our biweekly check-in meetings. I felt fully supported and trusted by her throughout the project, which gave me the confidence I needed to think, question, make mistakes, and learn freely. Both her public and her personal investment in my work gave me the legitimacy and support I needed to carry out the project productively.

At the central office level, the search work of returning evidence from my work with principals for policy recommendations was also well supported by the

superintendent. As noted above, Dr. Lane was very responsive to that process and shifted several modes of operation based on that feedback loop. The process of modeling and incorporating organizational culture activities for the central office that were based on self-reflective concepts required a level of buy-in from the leadership group that was not there when I began my work. Admittedly, I could have pursued more advanced leadership positions in that year that would have given me more formal authority to do this work. However, for reasons discussed below, I wanted to learn the organization's culture intimately before seeking to take charge of transforming it from above. I believe this approach set me up nicely for future work and will pay long-term dividends as I learn and build relationships in the central office. However, in the shorter term, carrying out this cultural work as a peer without extensive buy-in from the other leaders at the executive cabinet table was difficult.

Personal style, competencies, and approaches. The effectiveness of this work at both the principal and central office levels seemed to be strongly enhanced by several of my personal attributes and capacities (Moore, 1995). These include my layered professional experience, my leadership style, and my interpersonal approach in the project. The impact of each is described below.

Layered experience. My years spent in the education world helped to build my credibility and increased the level of success I was able to achieve. The concept of layered experience represents the idea that my career path has intentionally included an apprenticeship year at each new juncture, where I spent time acquiring the requisite skills and understanding before assuming responsibility for the next level. This means that I was a co-teacher before I was a teacher; after co-teaching I taught independently for six

years. I later brought my six years of lead teaching experience and a year shadowing a principal into my six-year tenure as a principal. This layered approach to my learning ensures that, when I enter a new level of responsibility with increased demands, I have a lot of prior knowledge to draw from. Although of course there is still a lot to learn at the new level, this reduces my risk of making gross missteps. Furthermore, the relatively long time I have served at each level is a product of my layered approach and a major factor in my professional credibility.

This layered experience was very helpful in my role over the course of this project. Four former principals served on the cabinet, but I was the one most embedded in the schools on a daily basis as I engaged in the search process. Thus I was able to use my experiential knowledge to interpret current realities for the other cabinet executives, who were less likely to visit the schools regularly. Overall, in carrying out this project, my instructional, organizational, and managerial experiences worked in tandem with the theoretical frameworks to build my credibility with both my central office peers and the principals in the district.

Data supports the notion that my experience and knowledge base were important factors in my unique effectiveness. When asked about my contributions to date, for example, one senior cabinet member remarked,

I think you add a significant amount of value in terms of experience, as well as being grounded in theoretical frameworks to inform your contributions and approach to the work in general . . . Your deep understanding of the principalship and effective teaching and learning is also a huge value add that is often missing in central office.

My credibility and experiential understanding were important because they enabled me to get the authorization to implement the programs and to engage in the boundary-crossing search process. One cabinet member noted, “Alison has a very important independent voice for what is happening at schools and she serves as a bridge between central office and schools, which is a critical need for the central office.” And another, “I appreciate the new school-focused eye you bring to our work. You are consistently reminding the team of the purpose of our work, and because you are in our schools regularly you provide a view that many of us not in schools regularly need.”

Besides adding credibility to each experience of success, there was an ongoing sense that I was an effective principal supervisor who knew what she was doing, which earned me even greater authority. Getting the authorization to take the principals on school visits in New York City and the subsequent follow-up meetings with Dr. Lane, the chief of curriculum and instruction, and the chief of school performance made quite an impact—not only on those involved but on those who had only heard about its success and wanted to know more about what was happening, what I was doing, and why it was working.

Vulnerability in leadership. Kegan et al. (2014) emphasize the need for organizations to be “deeply developmental organizations” that allow people to feel vulnerable and to surface their limitations in a safe environment where they can develop professionally. Kegan and his colleagues tell leaders that to foster such a culture “you should understand that you can’t want it just for the company. You must want it for yourself. You must be prepared to participate fully and even to ‘go first’ in making your own limitations public” (p. 6). This observation is critically important in the urban school

context, where people face so many challenges to feeling effective in their work. In this project there were several points where making my own learning challenges more visible and showing public vulnerability opened the door for others to follow suit in ways that were both surprising and powerful. An example of this occurred when I explored my immunity to change first-column commitment with the principals (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). This is an exercise that asks the participant to examine how aspects of their mindset get in the way of accomplishing a goal to which they are deeply committed. I admitted to the group that I had some limiting behaviors and was making assumptions that were getting in the way of my work with them. The principals were deeply affected by this admission. When asked to reflect on it a few weeks later, Robin commented, “I think about that every day, I think about it *every day*.” She went on to describe her own limiting mindset, which she was subsequently able to surface. Thus, my moment of vulnerability enabled the principals in the group to comfortably and publicly think about internal barriers to their own success, and it ultimately changed the trajectory of our work.

The power of that experience was not just that I made myself vulnerable but in what I actually shared. Leaders who take up this practice must do so thoughtfully, because the danger is that one might share things that make followers feel insecure and/or doubt if they should be following you. Therefore, I was careful not to share something so personal that it would make the group feel uncomfortable or make them question my competence or my ability to lead them. Wagner, Kegan et al. (2006) note that, “however bravely undertaken, however personally illuminating the journey,” this type of sharing is counterproductive if the content does not directly fit into the planned organizational

change strategy. My example of what was getting in the way of my first-column commitment goal to become more effective at convening our community of practice thus fit the criteria, as Wagner and Kegan hold that such sharing should “clearly demonstrate a personal learning goal that if not accomplished, will put at risk the collective owned improvement priority, or the ability to carry out a publically understood strategy for accompanying that priority” (p. 224). As Robin noted, my vulnerability opened the door for the principals to expose their own, and that moment exponentially increased the pace and depth of our work.

Another important byproduct of public vulnerability in leadership was that it made the invisible visible—it named truths that others in the organization were feeling but not expressing openly. In my experience, the authenticity that comes from leaders showing vulnerability has the power to speak the unspoken truth and to make people in an organization feel connected. Words from the heart speak to the heart, and in saying hard but honest things I often felt paradoxically that I made people relax more or open up more. One thing that facilitated this approach was that I was likely to name the tension in the room so at least we did not try to press through it when it was getting in our way. Several executive cabinet members recognized this without prompting. They described how I would name such issues and would frequently “call out” the voices at meetings that were less recognized. As cabinet member Lucy noted, “I appreciate that you don’t just talk to be heard, you say what needs to be said and because of this everyone wants to hear your perspective. You add great value to the team.” Sally, another cabinet member, noted:

Alison consistently notices how people are or not engaging in the meeting or

decisions that are being made and then calls it out. She helps assure ‘voice’ for the cabinet’s individual members, which contributes to multiple perspectives being shared to reach a more informed decision. She also consistently calls out what is sometimes uncomfortable to acknowledge about how the group’s behavior.

Dr. Lane also acknowledged this, noting that I “call out team members that are less vocal” and that “calling out the voices we seldom hear is important.”

People often are hungry to be free and to be released from the burden of what Kegan (2014) calls a “second job” of hiding weaknesses, thus when you are vulnerable as a leader and speak to a deep need of your people, they connect with you. “What if, instead of hiding their weaknesses, they were comfortable acknowledging and learning from them?” Kegan asks. We heard this release from the weightiness of image management several times in the survey results. Jane wrote that in the principals’ community of practice this freedom had a dramatic impact on her: “I don’t feel exploited and afraid. I can ask for help. I can listen. I don’t have to say things so that people think I am smart. I can learn from others without feeling less than them. This experience has been life changing for me personally and professionally.” In the focus group, Justice also noted that for her the vulnerability of this community of practice was freeing in a way that advanced her professional work:

I don’t care what anybody says, the [traditional] visits were dog and pony show. Showed them what I felt they wanted to see. And when [Alison] come[s] in, you want [her] to see it all. Just see it all. Give me honest feedback and talk to me. And it causes me to be very reflective about my practice. And where my shortcomings are. And to expose those shortcomings so I can get better at what I

do.

The challenges of the district's compliance culture had made this type of vulnerability difficult to admit among principals. In my experience interacting with principals and principal support staff, there has been frequent discussion of experiencing the effective teacher efforts as more evaluative than supportive, as well as a history of fear of the consequences of non-compliance with the managed curriculum. It was hard for the principals to make their struggles transparent in that type of environment, but they obviously wanted to, and the return on their investment in being vulnerable was a reminder that people want to live their authentic selves. In this case, both the principals and central office staff recognized that the success of their schools depended on their ability to diagnose limiting behaviors and insecurities that were getting in the way, and finding a space to do so with trusted colleagues had the potential to have a positive impact on the schools, teachers, and students alike.

Leadership competencies. I connect the success of this deeply interpersonal work on both the school level and central office level to some of the core leadership competences that others have observed in my work across several feedback domains. Most recently these include the Leadership Circle 360 feedback, and informal feedback from the principals and Dr. Lane during the project. My measurements on the 360 measures of leadership behaviors and assumptions that lead to a high level of fulfillment and high-achieving leadership are in the 90th percentile range in the areas of relating, authenticity, systems awareness, and achieving. Although my own self-assessment shows ratings on these dimensions in a substantially lower range than others' ratings of me, I was able to attribute some of the success of this work to my demonstration of these key

competencies. Authenticity relates closely to what I described earlier about vulnerability, and relating is likely equally germane to this work, as it speaks to “the leader’s capability to relate to others in a way that brings out the best in people, groups and organizations. It is composed of, caring connections, fostering team play, collaboration, mentoring and developing and interpersonal intelligence” (Leadership Circle Profile, 2011). This is consistent with Dr. Lane’s feedback during our 1:1 check-in meetings, where she shared that I have a special way of connecting with people, a way that is needed in the district. Others said as much during this project, and the consistency with which the data support my leadership style has allowed me to own it more readily, and to leverage it to have an impact in the arenas in which I find myself. I could see clearly how this strength related to the success of my work at both the school level and the central office level. While there was a lot to learn and a tremendous amount of uncertainty in my ability to do this work successfully, as is true for adaptive challenges, I was able to rely on my ability to relate to the people I was seeking to influence.

Design. As with my personal attributes, the project design had several qualities that proved to be especially impactful in yielding positive results.

Principal participant selection criteria. One of the unexpected dynamics of the principal support project was that it ended up including only women. This was not by design, but it seems to have been a great strength for the current group as it contributed to the group’s synergy and trust, and it helped to surface and support the group’s strong feelings about voice. This quality of the group is well represented by the name the female participants gave themselves: the Self-Reflecting Soul Sisters. Sisterhood was in fact a common theme for these women leaders, along with their dilemmas around voice,

resistance, and inner conflict in their work. Group members frequently reported having voiceless experiences, from sitting at district meetings feeling too uncomfortable to say anything, to intentionally trying to “stay off the radar” in dealings with the central office. For these women, this project offered a holding environment in which they could be vulnerable and engage in learning that supported risk-taking. Through this process, each came closer to discovering their leader’s voice, and this growth facilitated their willingness to express what I described in the results section—a healthy dissenting voice when institutional norms ran contrary to their unique insights into the needs of their school environment and their students. Naomi noted that, because of the group, she was “more likely to question the importance of the task as it is relevant to my school.” So while a single-gender group is likely a limitation to this study’s generalizability, it was also an advantage in that it facilitated a powerful learning experience for the participants.

While this gender dynamic was not by design, one aspect of the project that was intended to help the pilot group be more effective was the selection of all elementary school principals. As a former elementary school principal, I have a certain expertise in this area. I also believe that learning in horizontal groups is especially powerful and refreshing as the district strives to reach a place of instructional coherence within its grade bands. Grouping the principals vertically so that you have a mix of elementary, middle, and high school leaders can provide a rich learning experience as well, but that approach becomes more useful when there is greater coherence and mission alignment within schools across the district. This pilot sought to account for some common variation introduced through a vertical design (e.g., varying curricula, programs, schedules, and students’ developmental needs). Overall, however, the gender dynamic

seemed the most salient of the selection criteria in terms of its impact on the group's outcomes. In the face of prescriptive performance demands, these women had buried their natural instincts to lead from their core; being in this group seemed to help the participants become familiar with parts of themselves that had been buried. In short, being in this group seemed to lift a tremendous burden.

Pace: Going slow to go fast. Another key component of the project's design strategy at both the principal and central office levels was to move at a pace that was patient enough to allow the slow work of relationship-building to take hold before moving into core developmental activities. In the central office in particular, I felt early on that my verbal contributions about the team were flatly received, and people commonly referred to points I made as "Harvard talk." I felt misunderstood and ineffective in meetings, so after a few weeks I changed tactics. I began to understand that I needed to focus more on developing the relationships with people so they could see past "Harvard" and the abstract concepts I was raising and get to know me as a person and a practitioner. When I felt that the foundational relationships were stronger and my understanding of the context was deeper, I began to speak up more again and was thereafter well respected and appreciated, as the comments in the results section reflect. In the end, the slower pace served my approach well and created opportunities to do deeper and more impactful work that would have been counterproductive if done too early.

My initial approach was to immerse myself in the group, thereby giving myself enough shared experiences to build "connective tissue" with each principal. This included observing them in their own school environments, and diagnosing, modeling, and

supporting their professional reflections. The growing trust that came through this type of connection led to deeper levels of transparency, and this in turn allowed deeper issues to surface, which became fuel for our work. This early approach set the foundation for the project's personal mastery goals, as having sufficient observational work up front made much more effective goal-setting activities possible a few weeks later. It could be said that at times the pace still seemed not slow enough. For example, I underestimated how much time it would take to build trust among the principals and the intentional ways this needed to be facilitated. Nevertheless, the up-front investment in relationships and in creating an understanding context resulted in deeper and more efficient processes later on.

Fundamentally, it's still about good teaching. Elmore (2014b) continually emphasizes the need to get good at the fundamental practices. In this project, I discovered that principal support at its core was still about learning and instruction, and that the ingredients of being a good teacher were the things I relied on in the context of the project as well: fostering a culture of trust, risk-taking, and modeling learning, relationship-building, student centeredness, and learning in community. All of these concepts were very important to my work with the principals, and by sticking to these fundamentals this approach proved successful. These strong teaching practices, which I was in many ways just repeating at a higher level, proved to have a positive impact on the higher-level instructional core in my work with the principals.

I was well aware that I was intentionally modeling these instructional practices, and in the process I reflected transparently with the principals on what I was modeling so that, as noted in the results, they in turn could become intentional about replicating this

relationship model with their teachers (see Figure 2). Moreover, in discussing this learning across levels, Elmore (2014a) notes that “everyone’s learning is connected to everyone else’s” (p. 5), meaning that the students’ learning depends on the teachers’ learning, the teachers’ learning depends on the principals’ learning, the principals’ learning depends on the assistant superintendents’ learning, and so on. We know that when a teacher’s knowledge and skill increase they are better able to organize learning opportunities for their students, and in a similar way the learning principal can better organize learning for their teachers, and so on.

This multilevel coherence does not negate the fact that a learning-focused partnership is inherently reciprocal; I tried to model a learning stance in my relationships with the principals, and I in turn learned a lot from them. I do recognize that there was alignment and coherence in the practices I found to be effective in my teaching and in my coaching, thus I modeled them for the principals and encouraged them to develop these practices with their own teachers. Ultimately the work of a principal supervisor is really one of adult learning, so it is important for him or her to have a theory about how that learning happens and the optimal conditions under which learning is able to take place. As noted by the National Review Council (1999), “The principles of learning and their implications for designing learning environments apply equally to child and adult learning . . . The principles are relevant as well when we consider other groups, such as policy makers and the public, whose learning is also required for educational practice to change” (p. 27).

Differentiation in principal support. I sought to develop certain clear competencies in individuals in the principal group, and the process I used in my

individual coaching allowed the work to be tailored and flexible, and to move in any direction it needed to in keeping with the needs of the individual principals. There were wide differences in the degree and type of work the principals did, including teacher team-building, giving one-to-one teacher feedback, clarifying the instructional focus, and thinking more systematically and strategically. An example of this differentiation can be seen in the teacher feedback work. With Naomi we focused a great deal on tone, delivery, and use of physical space, which bled into other areas of her interpersonal work. With Robin, the focus was targeted more in the areas of content, use of evidence, and teacher feedback. In the end, differentiating my approach across principals allowed me to operate in non-linear ways while remaining clear in terms of the intended core outcomes.

Advantages of informal authority. At the central office level, one factor that enabled me to go a long way in developing relationships was the use of my informal authority, rather than my formal position, to develop these relationships. Grimsley (2014) notes that “informal leaders have several bases of power. They are able to use referent power; in other words, they lead by example . . . An informal leader can also use expert power: others seek them out for knowledge and skills no one else in the organization possesses.” Both of these advantages were helpful at times in my central office role.

In my experience, because the culture of hierarchical bureaucratic organizations so heavily emphasizes status in terms of titles, a person may actually need a big title to act effectively or to be heard or to have an impact, as status dictates how much power one has in the organization. While there were limitations (which I discuss below) regarding my position and the degree to which I could use it to have a broad impact on the district culture, being a peer rather than a higher-up allowed me to get closer to many more

players than I would have if I had come in with a big title. Having a more informal status allowed me to connect with others in an authentic way and enabled me to make people feel comfortable with me, to share and to open themselves up. It created space for receiving mutual council.

With my informal authority I was also able to move cross-functionally within the organization and spend time connecting in several departments. I shadowed the team and participated in their day-to-day practices and decision-making, thereby immersing myself in various subcultures within the organization. My resident status early on even allowed me to take the vulnerable approach discussed above more readily. Thus I was able to raise issues or questions that people were really thinking but did not feel it would be politically safe to say, due to their positions. Power changes the dynamic between people, and it was nice to enter the district with some informal authority, and then to build legitimacy and expertise through the work I did at the schools while also gaining people's trust.

Another advantage of my informal authority was that, because I was not in an official supervisory position, I was not bound by the formal structures that govern and constrain the current assistant superintendents. Although it created some tension with the assistant superintendents, this flexibility was essential to the study pilot because it allowed me to forgo many of the compliance mandates and fear-inducing evaluative components to principal support that are part of the role of assistant superintendent. My ability to work with principals outside of official evaluations allowed me to separate the power of support from that of accountability. Although I did not formally evaluate these principals, a process that can have high-stakes outcomes, as a good teacher I naturally

used all our interactions and my observations of them as diagnostic data to help me determine what support they needed and how I might provide it. Thus, rather than spending time on the same administrative processes that both principals and assistant superintendents said hamper their good work, I was able to focus on teaching and learning from my position, and on designing optimal support for the principals.

There is of course an open question of whether I would have been able to do the work in the same way if formal evaluations and their consequences—even with limited administrative time costs—were part of what I had to do. To that I would say that I am not an advocate for separating support and accountability, as long as support comes first. Moreover, I do not think the two roles have to be at odds, as there is no one better to evaluate someone's performance than the one offering the most support and the one most intimately in tune with that person's work and progress over time. They likely are also the person to whom you feel most accountable. I believe I would have done the work in very much the same way if evaluations had been part of it.

What Didn't Work: Impediments to Success

There are reasons why the project was not as successful as it could have been. These reasons fall within and beyond Mark Moore's strategic triangle framework, and they include aspects of operational capacity, legitimacy, and support, as well as the issue of simply needing more time than expected.

Lack of direct instruction in the principal project. While the individualized curriculum of the principal project had many advantages, in hindsight it's clear that a few more universal curricular elements would have been helpful, since relying on individual coaching lent itself to more variations and gaps than I would have liked to see in the

process. This unevenness was evident in the focus group, where it was clear that some essential content had been covered in much more detail with some group members than with others. For example, I had not covered the story of self in the same depth with all individuals, not because of their need for that tool specifically but because of the ebb and flow of the individual coaching trajectories. However, in hindsight I would have liked to cover this tool more evenly. In fact, holding a retreat to cover this and several other topics would have helped our collective learning a great deal. While there were group gatherings for the community of practice, the learning in those sessions was intentionally lateral, and I did not want to facilitate those meetings. Thus, having additional direct teaching time would have helped me continue to differentiate my coaching across participants while keeping the overall learning content more even.

Challenges to immediate buy-in among cabinet members. While the principal support program had strong value for the participating principals, one challenge to the effectiveness of establishing new norms in the executive cabinet meetings was that the cabinet members did not initially value the efforts very highly (Moore, 1995). I think there were several reasons for this. First, implementing cultural change can sound like yet another initiative, and central office staff members said they were feeling initiative fatigue on several occasions. Moreover, economic problems at PPS had led to a disruptive round of furloughs and layoffs in 2011. Thus, making oneself vulnerable and exposing one's weaknesses was likely seen as having potential economic consequences, and thus may have contributed to a guardedness among the staff that suppressed their appetite for reflective processes. The healing that may still be needed in the wake of those economic developments cannot be underestimated.

More immediately, however, part of the challenge for cabinet members was that my work seemed to come out of nowhere and proposed reflective activities that were counter to the group's standard business culture. After consulting with Dr. Lane, I appeared on the agenda for the decision-making protocol. Cabinet member Hal emailed me to inquire about the activity because it was so non-standard. He asked me, "Where did the agenda item come from? What's the goal?" I responded by explaining that the overarching goal was to become a highly effective team, and that this activity was a response to problems we had had in our group decision-making process. To this he replied, "I'm a believer that strong teams grow strong by accomplishing goals and sharing successes, working together and creating shared experiences—not by spending lots of time talking about how to become a strong team."

Hal is a well-respected cabinet member, and his response illustrates the lack of understanding and skepticism that I initially encountered in my work with this group. They tended to conflate meta-processes with "touchy feely" group work that was perceived to be less substantive, which made the meta-processes I was introducing less valuable to them than the more concrete goal-achieving efforts typically discussed at cabinet meetings. It should be said that the group had in fact gone through comprehensive reflective processes before, particularly as part of quarterly and annual external accountability for grant stock-takes. The team also had a few team-building norms, such as sharing a personal or professional highlight at the start of most meetings. A pocket of more reflective learning-centered teamwork was being done by the District Equity Leadership Team (DELT), which overlapped with the executive cabinet team and engaged in highly personal and interpersonal adaptive work. However, the complexity

and reflectivity involved with these approaches had not yet permeated the norms and habit of the executive cabinet. Such processes had not been part of the routine habit of work there, and they were not a component of daily or weekly cycles. Thus, while there was no active resistance to these reflective practices from the executive cabinet, they were certainly apprehensive at the outset that the new practices would require more time, repetition, and quality activities to truly displace ineffective team norms.

Limitations of informal authority. While informal authority does have its advantages, in testing its limits for this kind of work I found that the challenges described above would have benefited greatly from the legitimacy provided by my having more formal authorization and explicit inclusion in team needs and goals (Moore, 1995). There certainly were times I could use my informal authority and casual situations to influence team members' mindsets and self-limiting behaviors, and to introduce these reflective practices as potential norms to the cabinet. However, my work on this project suggests that informal approaches will eventually meet their limit (Moore, 1995), and that engaging in the deeper team-wide work that can help to establish these new norms as enduring group practices will require formal sanctioning and modeling by Dr. Lane and senior cabinet members. In fact, there recently has been movement in this direction. Dr. Lane has expressed her strong commitment to core team development work as an ongoing element of practice, which is reflected in recent activities such as engaging the group in the Myers-Briggs reflective process, requesting a formal commitment to the team from each member, and rewriting the vision and goals for the executive cabinet, all of which reinforces the critical element of the team's purpose. An ongoing commitment

to these kinds of efforts, in tandem with informal efforts, will ultimately create the deep transformation that is needed at the cabinet level.

Cultural change takes (more) time. While notable progress was made in terms of incorporating some organizational learning processes into executive-level work—such as the search process and some reflective norms in executive cabinet procedures—it is simply too soon to see the full potential of the informally authorized approaches this project used in the central office’s work to effect executive cabinet cultural change. Some barriers to more immediate results center around the apprehension and newness described above, yet in conducting this work I have come to believe there may be another barrier to the reflective process: a certain level of defensiveness in the culture, which may be a byproduct of the external pressure the district is facing on the teacher effectiveness performance ranges. Over the last few months there has been great pressure on and heavy criticism of the district from the local and national teachers unions to lower the performance ranges that delineate failing teachers from teachers in need of improvement. Standing its ground under these attacks puts PPS in a place of strategizing and garnering support around the importance of holding teachers accountable for student performance. Consequently, I believe there is currently little appetite for reflecting on what might not be working and more for defending one’s own position. Thus, instilling reflective practice as a norm at the executive cabinet level may require the establishment of an internal holding environment that distinguishes between hostile external critique and constructive internal reflection.

Theory of Action Revisited

Inherent in the implementation of a theory of action is its iterative nature. This requires reviewing it in light of the learning and reflection that is part of strategic action. With this in mind, there are some post-action reflections that have implications for what I would do differently as a result of the above analysis. Below is a revised theory of action, with amendments noted in text and discussed immediately below:

If Pittsburgh Public Schools . . .

- Create systems and structures to allow principal supervisors to focus primarily on coaching principals in engaging in a process of inner and outer work to enhance the principals' adaptive and instructional leadership repertoires
- Support principals in forming communities of practice among their peers
- Engage, train, and evaluate assistant superintendents as a boundary-crossing search agents
- And utilizes formal¹ and informal authority to model, embody, and authorize the concerted² work of cultivating continuous learning and reflective leadership practices among central office executives

Then

- A coherent structure of organizational teams focused on continuous improvement in learning, teaching, and leadership will develop across every level of the school system, with substantially increased capacity to create and continually improve learning outcomes for all students.

Theory of Action Amendments

1. Originally this section spoke only to the need to “take steps” toward the stated organizational learning and reflection practices. Through the course of this project, these steps have been illuminated for me, and they most centrally include the need to use formal authority for both the authorization and embodiment of the change process.
2. The original section did not take into account the time- and place-based considerations of the process. Here, the idea of concerted work represents both the need (1) to go as slowly as necessary early on to ensure that the proper foundation is laid and that traction is established in the relationships and the contextual knowledge needed to lead change; and (2) to leverage formal authority to create the urgency and buy-in necessary to maintain a steady rate of change.

Implications for Site

Principal Supervisor Competency, Recruitment, and Development

Prioritize adaptive leadership competencies for assistant superintendents. As noted in the analysis regarding effective approaches, I have several capacities that contributed to the successes of the principal project. These are both adaptive and technical in nature, and to be optimally effective requires competence in both domains well beyond those that I personally felt skilled in. Typically in the field, and here in Pittsburgh, the technical skills needed for this type of work are those that are better documented and understood. Thus, in seeking individuals to do this work, districts can outline technical needs clearly and accurately. The expectations for adaptive needs, however, are discussed in much broader strokes, perhaps because they are less well understood.

Here in Pittsburgh, recognition of these adaptive needs has been growing, as represented in the evolution of the recent assistant superintendent job description. The version initially published included only general adaptive concepts, using terms like “effective leader of people,” “proven ability to build capacity,” “knowledge about change management,” and “ability to build collaborative relationships.” These are without question important skills, but these terms lack any specificity of what undergirds the general concepts. A revised version of the assistant superintendent job description more successfully details what these larger competencies look like in practice. What was called “communication, interpersonal, and team skills” in the old description is stated as “the

ability to build collaborative relationships” in the new version, and it goes beyond that to name ten specific sub skills that indicate competency in this domain. This new version does a vastly improved job of outlining the requisite adaptive competencies sought in an effective assistant superintendent.

Based on the research and practice built into this project, as well as the literature that has informed it, there are additional frameworks that can further distill the adaptive competences in ways that will be helpful in identifying and selecting future assistant superintendents who have the greatest potential to develop and support successful principals. Most immediately helpful is the Leadership Circle’s (2011) set of five “Creative Leadership Competencies,” which can be understood as follows:

1. Self-awareness: A leader who pursues service over self-interest, exhibits a healthy work-life balance, demonstrates composure in the face of conflict, and actively pursues professional learning and growth
2. Relating: Ability to form warm and caring relationships, foster high-performance teamwork both across the organization and within his or her own teams, the ability to cultivate finding common ground, demonstrated ability to develop growth in others, and able to manage the feelings of others as well as their own
3. Authenticity: Represented by adherence to their own espoused principles, and a willingness to take a tough stand in the face of risk
4. Systems awareness: Demonstrated by a vocational call to service of community, a concern and ability for sustainable improvement, and discerning the health of the whole system rather than their individual responsibilities

5. Achieving: Leans toward strategic thinking, has a personal vision for their role, and makes timely decisions and moves forward through uncertainty, has a history of demonstrated results

The points above are abbreviated versions of the fuller discussion of these competencies provided by the Leadership Circle. I believe they capture the most essential themes of the core adaptive skills that assistant superintendents need. This framework also makes it clear that the new PPS job description addresses several aspects of what the Creative Leadership Competencies emphasize, including principles of collaboration, mentoring and developing, purpose and vision, and producing results, among others. There are, however, still several Creative Leadership adaptive competencies not on the list that would be strong additions to the PPS framework, especially in the areas of authenticity and self-awareness. They are associated with strong leadership and organizational success, and they relate to ideas valued by the principals served by this project. Thus, one major implication of this project is the identification, description, and prioritization of nuanced adaptive skills that this project has shown are particularly effective for assistant superintendents.

Identifying high-level adaptive leadership among assistant superintendent candidates. The framework above, particularly in its more elaborated version, complements and extends the movement that PPS is showing in this area. The question remains, however, how one goes about identifying these characteristics in potential candidates. In this regard, having clearly articulated the competencies above, many of the resources available through the district's partnership with the Urban School Human Capital Academy are malleable to the adaptive competencies suggested above for the

assistant superintendent's position. These tools include robust interview techniques and selection process activities that are already being used in districts within the network, such as performance tasks, role-plays, and having current principals on the selection committee. These techniques would be extremely helpful here in Pittsburgh.

Finally, to be clear, the skills we are looking for will be hard to find. Thus, in addition to looking closely at the values any internal candidates may demonstrate, we should actively recruit from outside the district. This is not because either group is more or less qualified; it is because we need to attract and retain the most talented individuals possible to do this work. Pittsburgh's reputation is growing nationally, and the time is ripe to make PPS a destination for the nation's top educators at all levels. Thus, we should expand our current active recruitment to include promising emerging leaders wherever they are, including individuals and groups in elite training spaces and local talent that may be interested in serving the region's urban schools.

Developing requisite capacities in principal supervisors. In addition to recruiting the talent needed to fill an expanded version of this principal support project, newly hired assistant superintendents or those already on board may need ongoing support to ensure that they also have the capacities necessary to do this work. For the creative leadership capacities identified in the Leadership Circle framework, assistant superintendents should receive the 360-style feedback that this framework supplies. Once areas of need are identified, targeted executive coaching could be employed to help them develop in the needed areas. Such coaching is available through various consulting sources, and supporting the current assistant superintendents in securing this coaching would be a valuable investment for the district. Additionally, building a community of

practice among assistant superintendents would also help these leaders to continually develop and sharpen each other in these skills through the group's lateral learning mechanisms.

Improving the Work of Principal Supervision

At the heart of the need for the adaptive skills just described is improving student achievement, which inherently requires educators to do their work differently. One of the most important advantages of having an adaptive skill set is that it enables a person to have a flexible mindset so they can adjust their practice as they learn new ways to be effective in their work, which going forward should have an increased role on holistic instructional leadership and teacher development. To be sure, accomplishing this transformation likely requires relaxing or reassigning some of the responsibilities that principals currently hold. The duties most easily reassigned might include business management functions, order and purchase work, transportation management, technical support around human resources, and overall paperwork requirements across domains. Brokering resources to alleviate these duties will help them focus on instructional learning more holistically, and this may mean the district will help them assess and develop capacities among their own staff to delegate some of this kind of work.

With these types of adjustments in mind, my experience in this project revealed several points of practice that, while not widely applied in Pittsburgh, did produce tangible outcomes. These practices warrant consideration for district-wide expectations for the assistant superintendent.

Disentangling the uses of the RISE evaluation rubric and instructional

rounds. Instructional rounds are a practice schools and school systems use to improve the

quality of teaching in schools. The main aspect of this approach is to observe a network of educators within or across schools or districts. Pittsburgh Public Schools currently demonstrates some commitment to instructional rounds in some of its observational practices, such as its horizontal and vertical learning structures for principals, but my work with principals in this project suggests that these adaptations could be more tightly woven into the core activities of the instructional rounds practice, as described by City et al. (2009).

City et al.'s (2009) instructional rounds is a practice that builds and reinforces a culture of improvement by emphasizing that educators stay in descriptive versus evaluative mode as they observe classroom teaching. In their words, “description before analysis, analysis before prediction, prediction before evaluation” (p. 34). Among the seven principals I worked with, however, their understanding of the nuances of instructional rounds was quite vague. While the idea of making group observations is rightfully understood to be a part of this practice that is experienced during vertical and horizontal principal meetings, the principals did not seem to have a solid understanding of the essential descriptive language component. They instead favored a sort of shortcut language based on terminology from the RISE rubric—for example, “3G” to speak of culturally relevant practices and “1F” to speak of the domain of planning and preparation that goes into lesson planning—without unpacking the nuanced descriptions that are at the heart of the transformative power of instructional rounds. Certainly the RISE rubric itself is not the issue here, as it has its own excellent purposes. But this conflation of RISE terminology and instructional rounds practices caused people to jump to the highest levels of inference (evaluation) in ways that instructional rounds was specifically

designed to prevent. Thus, I am concerned that the lack of specificity and nuance in the curtailed language they are using is undermining the development of the essential practice of staying in descriptive mode.

Thus, I suggest that the district will be best served if the RISE and instructional rounds frameworks are used more fully and more distinctly. Instructional rounds are a system of practice and can be used at many levels of an organization. At PPS, instructional rounds practices could be used at all levels of the system to build a culture of improving efforts to addressing a common problem of practice, such as African American student engagement. In this way, teachers and administrators alike can utilize the tools of group observation, descriptive language, shared reflections, and action planning to continually improve practices across schools. What instructional rounds is not designed to do, however, is to be a supervision and evaluation tool (City et al., 2009). Instead, it is a culture-building activity designed to infuse infrastructure for a learning-centered community in the district. Conscientiously teasing instructional rounds away from the RISE rubric builds a low-stakes, continuous mechanism for collaborative learning and improvement into the district for all participants.

Meanwhile, the RISE rubric is a powerful and comprehensive research-based reified tool that the boundary-spanner (assistant superintendent, along with the principal) can use to do the necessary evaluation work, while also having functions to scaffold observations and improve instructional practice for individual teachers. The RISE rubric is thus an essential tool for principals to use in their individual work with their faculty in their efforts to evaluate and improve both specific and general teacher practices. Moreover, to be clear, principals can and do use RISE as a tool in group observations, but

the benefits of that are more around calibrating evaluation standards and building their own facility in using it than in creating a learning culture in the way rounds are designed to do. In that respect, RISE is more evaluative and developmental for individual teacher practice, while rounds is culture-building and developmental for everyone involved, and at multiple levels of the organization. These two tools need not be at odds; both are necessary and should be individually implemented with fidelity in their unique capacities. This could be done very formally, in ways akin to New York City, where the people in the organization who evaluate principals and those who holistically support them are different.⁵ Or it can be done informally by applying the two frameworks in their separate ways among the same community members. Regardless of how it is done, maintaining their distinctness will preserve their value.

Additionally, while I did not explicitly serve in this project as an evaluator of the participating principals, there is no more qualified person to evaluate a person's work than someone who knows it well. As the principals' supervisor in this project, in addition to knowing what technical skills they have, I had a strong sense of their mindsets and orientations toward their practice and how to improve it. Thus, I believe that the principal supervisor should continue to evaluate the principals in their care and that they are the best person to do so. It is conceivable, however, that adding an evaluation component to the work I did with these principals would have changed the tenor of the group, particularly in terms of the level of openness the principals felt when I was present. However, it is unlikely that the results found here were explicitly the byproduct of a lack of evaluation. It is important to keep in mind that the formation of a community of

⁵ In fact, in New York they even allowed principals to choose their network leader (support person) to reinforce the supportive nature of the relationship.

practice is not dependent on the supervisor's presence. The supervisor helps to establish the group but is not intended to lead continually. The facilitation and learning in these groups are lateral and thus would be effective tools whether the supervisor is an evaluator or not. We have seen in this project, in the broader research, and in my experience as a school leader that principals do this dual work of participating learner and evaluator of teachers every day. By participating in learning groups with teachers, principals in fact effectively act as collaborators even as they are ultimately the evaluator.

Thus, while some of the less productive venting or cathartic conversations may be curbed by the presence of an evaluator, my experience leads me to believe that is unlikely, as individuals will not be inclined to fully engage in this type of experience because their evaluator is present, unless either the culture of evaluation in the organization or the relationship between the principal and supervisor does not represent the community of practice values of shared learning, openness, and collective responsibility. In the end, most principals will be working hard to succeed and will want to benefit from effective support. Moreover, the vast majority of the interactions in the kinds of relationships proposed here would be developmental rather than evaluative. Given these structures and the nature of the programming described above, this supervisor/supervisee has just as much potential for openness and sharing around professional practice as we see between supervisors and supervisees in any other realm (e.g., principals and teachers, advisors and students, etc.). Ultimately, with the strength developmentally focused feedback brings, the evaluation portion of this effort in the end is likely to complement, rather than confound, this work.

Finally, as noted above, there are organizational structures that separate evaluation from support for principals. This is particularly valuable for maintaining an objective vantage point in evaluating principals. And while I would not suggest total separation of evaluation and support, it may be worth considering the possibility of a hybrid system where one of perhaps three evaluations/observations that a principal receives in a year be conducted by an alternative assistant superintendent. That way, the findings across evaluators could be compared in order to achieve the most accurate perspective of the principal's work.

In principal supervision, emphasize observations of teamwork. District-wide, and in much of the field, the main focus in teaching observations has understandably been around observing individual teachers' classroom instruction when trying to diagnose and improve practice. My findings here, however, suggest that, in addition to these individual spaces, observing teacher teams has unique and significant value for improving practices school-wide. These groups are likely to have strong ties to teacher learning and instructional improvement, thus I recommend that assistant superintendents focus considerable energy on observing with principals and on training principals in observing, structuring, and being a participant observer in these teacher teams.

The seven PPS principals I worked with had many configurations of collaborative teacher teams in their schools, from discipline committees, to an instructional cabinet, to grade-level teams, to teams focused on the teaching and learning environment. Some overlapped, and they were of various lengths of time, functions, and frequencies. We looked at how much time they had to organize with teachers and how that could move instruction. However, as far as impacting student achievement, many of the groups I

observed were haphazardly structured and were not focused on increasing their pedagogical repertoires. There was data, it was omnipresent, but the data questions were mostly used to group children by skill (or lack of), and data discussions did not lead them to harness best practices from a key resource—each other.

I do not mean to suggest that there were no teaching teams in these schools or district-wide, but in my work with principals I saw that, as a principal supervisor, I could have a tremendous impact on the organization, structure, and quality of those teams in terms of improving classroom instruction. The principals and I agreed on a way of using team time to accomplish lateral coherence, thereby aligning expectations for student learning with practices across the classrooms of a school.

My strategy for working with principals to cultivate effective teaching teams started by prioritizing my observation of those teams in their natural structures. I would find out when the teams were meeting and then attend the meeting as a process observer with the principal. I refrained from asking the principals to schedule these teacher team meetings around my own availability because it was important to me to observe the natural ebb and flow of the school organization. During the meetings, my coaching with the principals focused on listening to what teachers were saying, how they seemed to be learning, and what they were compelled to talk about. The principals in this case were participant observers, and I believe that because they were both an immediately present resource and observing in a non-evaluative role, their participation provided a greater opportunity to promote open teacher learning and development.

Essentially, the assistant superintendent can help the principal cultivate communities of practice among the teacher teams, which in turn can facilitate richer

conversations about the work in ways that harness continuous learning, sharing knowledge, and trusting, nonjudgmental relationships. In this context, the principal is also a learner, which builds the bonds between the teachers and their leader. In the end, by establishing and focusing on observing these teaching teams, principals are providing a routine and a structure that are possibly the most important pathways from the principal to the classroom, as they directly impact the instructional core by investing in the development, knowledge, and skills of the teacher. Thus, focusing more assistant superintendent efforts on observing and supporting the principals' ability to create and participate in these teams can have an important impact on effective instruction and student learning district-wide.

The Conditions of Improvement: Implications for the Central Office

While this project uncovered and reinforced many best practices for principal support and the use of adult learning and development in the field, from the beginning there was a second goal—to help the district develop into the kind of learning organization that would sustain this type of support approach for school leaders. Moreover, as we think about attracting and retaining the kinds of leaders and teachers we need to take the district to a new plateau in organizational culture, we must think more than ever about being the kind of place these future leaders and teachers will want to commit to for the long term. Adaptive skilled leaders will want flexible, relational, and learning-centered work environments. This work has identified several ways that PPS can move closer to that goal.

Continue the search process for district leadership. One of the more compelling findings in this project was that the principal supervisor role functioned well

in a search capacity. People in the central office used me and the evidence I was bringing to them from the schools and principals to make real policy changes. I believe this model can work well elsewhere, provided the assistant superintendents have the requisite capacities discussed earlier. Moreover, Dr. Lane's role as a search agent was instrumental in providing information that impacted district operations.

Given these successes, the central office should fully recognize the assistant superintendent position as essential to the hierarchy of district management and maximize its utility as a search agent in the following ways:

1. Assistant superintendents should be reinstated as cabinet-level executives in the district. They are unique central office executives in that they are the most directly embedded in schools and maintain ongoing relationships with school leaders. Thus they are the most capable of providing the invaluable search information and should have a regular voice in district conversations at the highest level.
2. The central office should incorporate systems that fully maximize the search evidence provided by assistant superintendents. They could include reporting structures or communication mechanisms throughout the central office. The key is that the executive directors would harness these findings and work collaboratively to deepen their understanding, which would require taking a learning stance toward this process and a commitment to incorporate this evidence.

It should be said that the executive directors and other central office staff members should and do have relationships with school leaders and staff. Still, the

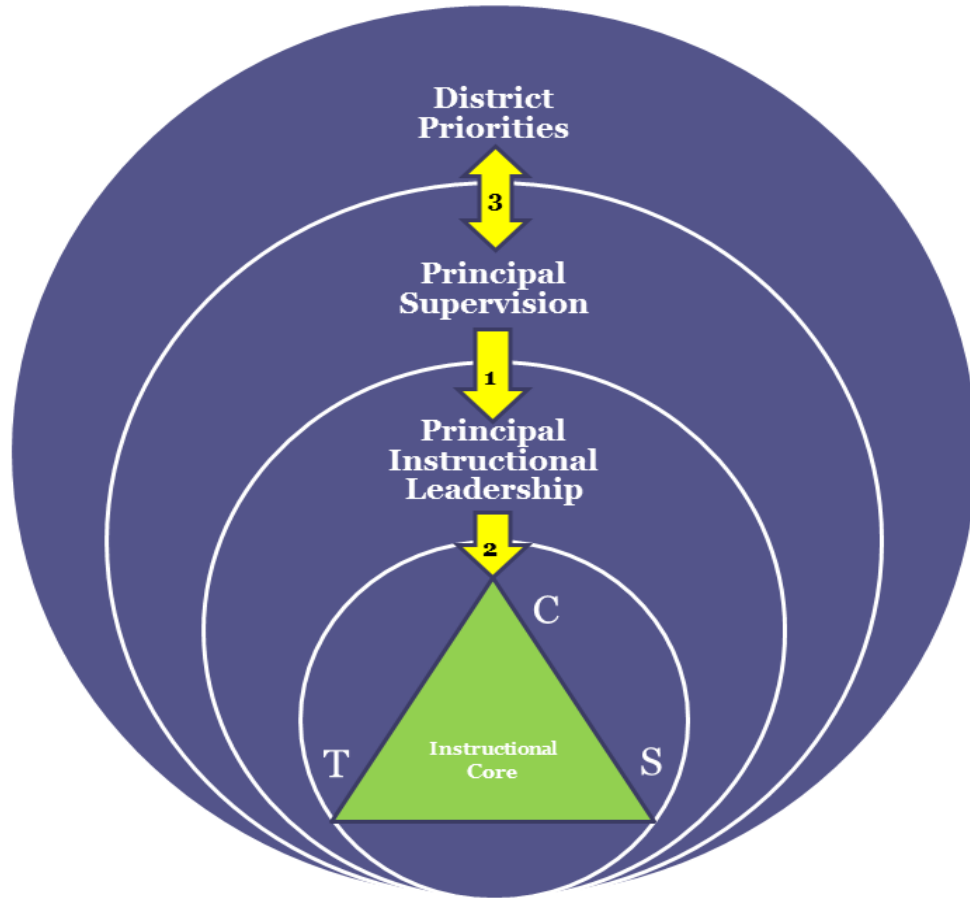
assistant superintendents are uniquely positioned to have this search process be an explicit function of their work. The findings from the assistant superintendent search processes can of course be triangulated with other available data sources as necessary, but the hope is that they will be reliable and capable enough to be a trusted source in and of themselves.

Continue the through-line: Maintaining the connection from central office capacity to principal capacity to teacher capacity to improved student achievement.

The ultimate goal for this work is to improve student achievement, and while it is too early to test for student learning outcomes at this phase of the project, the work presented here operates with the common understanding that, as the adults grow and improve in skill and knowledge, they will enable student achievement more effectively through their actions at multiple points of the district organization. This line to student learning is most centrally supported through three processes: the overall bifurcated work of the principal supervisor, the formation of continuous learning teams across levels in the district, and the fostering of a culture of collective responsibility. Each of these is discussed here as it pertains to student achievement.

Utilize social learning practices and personal mastery development led by principal supervisors to impact the instructional core. Although several organizational layers away from students, Figure 6 shows that principal supervisors can have an impact on student achievement from multiple directions. First and foremost, principal supervisors can have an immediate and powerful impact on principals' instructional leadership, particularly when coupling instructional

Figure 6: Student Achievement Effects Model



support with the personal mastery and social learning approaches piloted in this project (Arrow 1). As the results here show, even in the few months this project has been in operation, principals have reported improvements in the instruction and culture of their home schools through the work done here (Arrow 2). These efforts strike directly at the instructional core (Elmore, 2004), and thus are high-impact strategies for improving student learning.

Concurrently, as noted throughout this discussion, for true systemic change to occur, the central office must create the conditions that make it possible to provide the tools needed to support and sustain the adaptive and learning-centered approaches being

utilized at the school level. These conditions, highlighted throughout this discussion, include trust and vulnerability, continuous learning, risk-taking, reflection, learning from mistakes, and learning in teams. The principal supervisor plays an important role in this cultural development through both the search process and as a cabinet team member with formal authority (Arrow 3). Through these roles, the principal supervisor provides evidence and best practices that contribute to the creation and maintenance of the conditions necessary for sustainable improved practice in instructional leadership. Prioritizing the identification of assistant superintendents who have the necessary capacities and investing in recruiting, training, supporting, and retaining individuals in this unique role as a critical human resource will help to ensure that these individuals are properly leveraged as agents of improved student learning, and that a powerful mechanism for continuously improving instructional practice is fully integrated into the long-term functioning of the district.

Incorporate teams of continuous improvement on every level of district organization. Throughout this pilot, there was strong evidence of the power collective lateral learning had in the social context of a community of practice. The key component that facilitated learning in these communities was the flat structure; the principals rotated facilitation of the group and took responsibility for their shared learning. Then, as they sought to improve instruction in their own schools, the principals moved beyond scrutinizing individual teacher's classroom practices and began participating in collective analyses of teaching practices with self-reflecting teacher teams. Thus, we see a process whereby the principal supervisor emphasized shared learning in teams as a powerful lever for student improvement, and the principals consequently built on their firsthand

experiences in a community of practice and transferred that learning to engage with their teachers more effectively. In just a short time, the principals reported seeing improved teacher instruction through these learning teams.

The principals' success in seeing and replicating early results from these learning teams at the school level, along with the conclusions drawn from research on social learning in educational leadership (Honig, 2008; Wenger, 2000), led me to recommend that if central office executive cabinet members were able to participate in a personalized manner on a local, highly effective, continuous learning team, then they too would internalize the tools and conditions that led to its success and be more likely to support this kind of lateral learning with the teams they lead. Moreover, because leadership has such potential to model, inspire, and institute cultural change, the emergence of these collaborative learning structures among executive cabinet leaders—both as a group and in the teams they lead—would cement the value of collective improvement necessary to support these learning teams at the school and principal levels for the long term. However, these teams were not created just for the sake of being on a team. Rather, the important components of continuous learning teams are flat structures, rotating responsibilities, investment in negotiating meaning, vulnerability and safety, and lateral learning.

Foster culture of collective responsibility. Emerging from the continuous learning team structure is an important mechanism that must be cultivated and protected to ensure systemic change. The collective inquiry that is fostered through communities of practice helps to remind us of our collective responsibility for student success. It reminds us of our interdependence and not only begins to build trust and foster vulnerability but

also nurtures the idea that we should take shared responsibility for each other so that one school will not thrive at the expense of another. Thus, the individual with a collective sense of responsibility believes that, beyond ensuring that my classroom, school, or department is improving, by serving students effectively I am also invested in supporting other teams and individuals throughout the district.

Develop a strategic plan for organizational learning. The central office has taken several important steps toward cultural change in the district. Work by the District Equity Leadership Team (DELT) and Central Office Renewal (CORE), leadership self-assessments, and efforts to hold policy recommendation meetings with teachers and principals represent valuable cultural work and organizational growth opportunities. These efforts are challenging on a number of levels, but they are critically important to the health of the executive team and the larger district. Khan (2009) discusses the need for these difficult processes as “tolls,” noting that

I think of these tasks as *tolls* that each project team must pay to continue on its trip. Unless these tolls are paid—fully paid—rather than partially paid or avoided all together, the team will have difficulty continuing along the main road that will take it to where you want to go. The team will stay stuck at the toll until it can pay what it needs to pay. (p. 11)

Khan continues to suggest that the first toll is clarifying the teams’ purpose and mission, a process Superintendent Lane recently led us through. Khan goes on to outline the developmental trajectory of successful team-building and the tolls and barriers that teams encounter along the way (Table 6). Recognizing the notion that teams develop over a trajectory can be helpful because it allows for acknowledging and celebrating the team’s

growth.

Table 6: Khan's Dimensions of a team life (Khan, 2009)⁶

Dimensions of Team Life	Tolls	Obstacles
Team Formation	Develop common mission (what the team exists to be and do) and initial structures (how members should work together on behalf of their shared mission).	Significant differences in members' agendas, needs, commitments, and willingness to compromise. Lack of safety necessary to speak openly about personal agendas
Roles and Responsibilities	Create and assume roles that allow for all aspects of teamwork to be performed fairly and equitably.	Member's unwillingness to openly acknowledge their own roles and abilities, and provide feedback regarding those of others. Variances in participation and contribution to teamwork.
Influence and Decision-Making	Enable team members to assume appropriate authority that allows for shared responsibility and effective decision-making processes.	Individual differences in need of power and influence. Difficulty in creating collective ways to collaborate across roles.
Process Improvements	Identify initial patterns of team interactions and choose which patterns to maintain and which to alter or terminate.	Anxiety of speaking openly about patterns of interaction. Collective pulls toward conformity
Useful Conflict	Create effective ways to acknowledge, respect, integrate, and learn from differences among team members.	Anxiety of threat triggered by differences, creating individual and collective defensive patterns and routines.
Full Engagement	Identify and alter patterns of team interactions to enable members to be fully engaged in their work together.	Members' unwillingness to openly acknowledge and change their perceptions of one another based on relevant data.
Final Examination	Finish project team experience in ways that enable individual and collective learning and allow for closure	Members' desire to avoid difficult conversations and emotions related to endings.

⁶ Although these principles are based in student project team functioning that differ in many ways from a senior executive team work, they can be adopted at least at a basic level to support the PPS executive team in developing its own journey and in identifying tolls and obstacles that may get in the way.

My recommendation here is that these individual efforts would benefit from being woven together into one cohesive frame around the concept of organizational learning. Below is a recommended process for building on the current work, and establishing and executing a strategic plan for organizational learning.

I. Continue individual style work with additional robust inventories. To date, the administrative team has carried out a Myers-Biggs Type Indicator (MBTI) inventory of personality styles and has begun discussing its implications for team dynamics. The commonly used The Leadership Circle 360 feedback process would be a helpful supplement to the MBTI. This process allows team members not only to assess themselves but also to blindly assess each other's strengths and challenges. Participants select the person they will receive feedback from, and here a specification can be that they use current team members. This feedback would be helpful in bringing individual team members' blind spots to their own attention and in the process to bring challenging team dynamics to the fore. This work will help establish peer feedback as a norm among team members in a nonthreatening way, because the feedback is given specifically to the individuals. The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Inventory (2007) could also be helpful in this work. It assesses an individual's behavioral profile in conflict situations, which enables them to understand and improve on their approach to dealing with the inevitable conflicts of teamwork.

II. Transition from individual assessments to full team effectiveness assessments. Individual assessments are helpful and essential to becoming a learning organization, but they are not enough to address team dynamics that may be preventing team synergy and effectiveness—even when they have built in consideration for team

contexts. For this work, team assessments that encompass learning organization ideals—such as self-awareness, deliberate and structured reflection, and getting better at the act of learning itself—must be used to build the individual inventories. One assessment that meets these criteria and would be particularly effective for the PPS executive cabinet context is Immunity to Change for teams (Kegan & Lahey, 2009), which specifically addresses team-level blind spots, unrecognized beliefs, and hidden assumptions that undermine team effectiveness. In short, it can help name things that are unspoken or that are being avoided in team cohesion, so that instead of these things impacting the team, the team can impact them. Table 7 provides a summary of how the Immunity to Change process can be helpful in the team context.

Table 7: Immunity to change for teams (consolidated by Vedere Consulting, 2014)

Team Improvement Goal	Doing/Not Doing Instead	Hidden Commitment	Big Assumption
Create a culture of mutual trust and unwavering support.	We don't listen very well to each other; we'd rather tell each other. We talk behind each others backs. We feel that if we haven't been personally consulted, it wasn't a decision. We avoid difficult conversations with each other. We don't share information. We are very judgmental and critical of each other. We don't assume the best intent.	We are each committed to not having to follow anyone else's directions; to our own selfish independence. We are committed to winning, even if it means others in the group will lose. We are committed to not having to rely on others, to never having to depend on others. We are committed to not working through conflicts directly, to not wearing ourselves out. We are committed to preserving the pleasure of harshly criticizing and judging each other.	There is an inherent conflict between entrepreneurship and collective collaboration—you can't have both. We are essentially living in an "every man for himself" world; if things go badly for any one of us, the firm won't be there to back us up. If we aren't personally involved in a decision, it can't be a good one. Taking our team to the next level is a choice, we do not have to take this step.

--Kegan & Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, 2009, p 100)

These team and self-assessments can become costly, but there are some low-cost ways to conduct this work. Khan's Pit Stop Form (2009) is a team self-assessment that can be facilitated by a team leader, and it helps the team assess and reflect on its performance at any given point and time (Appendix D). It can be conducted as a diagnostic, or it can be used frequently over time to monitor progress. The cost of consulting and the need for internal leadership on these efforts can be addressed by having a point person who is embedded in the team to lead them.

III. Consolidate individual and team inventories to assess where the team is on the developmental trajectory of a learning organization. This step requires using group and individual data to assess who the group is as a team and what strengths and areas for growth and development they have, particularly as they pertain to an organizational learning perspective. This type of process can be conducted by a facilitator, with the explicit goal of identifying where the team may be on the Khan (2006) developmental trajectory. This information will be used to set the goals stated in step 4.

IV. Develop a theory of action and strategic priorities for continued efforts to move the team toward effectiveness in organizational learning. As with the process above, the team should invest in a process of setting goals for itself in terms of effectiveness in organizational learning, particularly as it pertains to the superintendent's evolving statement of purpose for the team. The status of that process makes this an optimal time for setting organizational learning goals as well. This process also can be done through facilitated group work and, together with step 3, is perhaps best conducted in a team retreat.

V. Build on existing reflective and double-loop learning practices in cabinet meetings. The cabinet meeting processes that were recently installed as a part of this project were generally well received, but consensus was that they had not had enough time to take root and truly alter group norms. Thus, the team should continue to revisit and incorporate them with an eye toward seeing collective patterns emerge so that learning becomes cumulative. Most importantly, engaging in a collective reflective process goes beyond finding solutions to the problems to focus on improving how we learn as well. This examination of our own group learning process, or double-loop learning, is a higher order problem-solving approach because it teaches us how to be more flexible and adaptive in our strategies for problem-solving. Also, as with the broader initiatives above, through their reflective nature these activities help ensure that individuals on the ground level feel they can talk about the problems in their work and give each other honest feedback. Reflective processes allow for disagreements to surface in nonthreatening ways. This type of action will always require some courage from the dissenter or the critic, but it should not take an exceptional act of courage for people to feel comfortable voicing a difficult truth. These initiatives help make the cabinet meeting a place where raising such truths is an appreciated and nonthreatening norm.

Lastly, as noted above, recent efforts have been made in the direction of becoming a learning organization, and these suggestions are meant to build on those efforts. There are also, however, efforts that are more lateral to the suggestions above that are highly valuable because they embody the type of mission and processes needed for organizational learning in their distinct contexts. In terms of mission, the CORE team's work embodies the spirit of this change through its mission to promote a positive culture

and environment throughout the central office. In terms of process, the district is already doing courageous learning work in many ways in the area of equity. In DELT, we continue to see the way personal identity and limiting mindsets around race are impacting our work with students. We verbalize and co-construct core equity beliefs that speak specifically to our organizational leadership beliefs about race and leadership for racial equity. We encourage one another to be courageous, and we share ways we can continue to act on and embody our purpose as a leader for racial equity at the personal, professional, and organizational level. The skills we are practicing during these DELT trainings around being authentic and transparent in our leadership are all powerful foundations to build on. In this way, our equity work is a model for the learning organization culture and effective teamwork that is needed in our central office, thus recognizing that this model can be leveraged for change in the general learning organization areas described above. In short, we don't need to go too far for a best practice to become a learning organization. DELT is already pushing the team to develop the discipline of having courageous conversations, of being vulnerable, and of speaking truth over peace. These same approaches are what will move the executive cabinet toward learning organization priorities, and this progress will ultimately be transformative for the district as a whole.

Supporting and Leveraging the Participating Principals Going Forward

Another important consideration for building the findings here into strategic improvement practices is the continued support and the leveraging of principals who are currently participating going forward. There are several initiatives that will ensure that

this group continues to have an impact in their school and also helps to scale-up the work in which they have participated.

Continue the current principal community of practice. First, the community of practice they participated in should continue, and at roughly the same size. The addition of two or three new members can also be considered and may benefit the lateral learning of the group while also expanding the groups' benefits to more principals in the district. However, my experience suggests that these groups should not be too large, given their depth of communication and sharing. Ten may be the maximum number, and as the number of groups expands it is conceivable that each assistant superintendent could have two groups among his or her principal supervisees. As the original group continues, we should continue to monitor its development to learn more about the growth and maturity of these groups over time and to look for more instructional leadership effectiveness indicators, including teacher attendance, student attendance, Teaching and Learning Environment (TLE) survey results, and, ultimately, student achievement data.

Open communication between principals' and assistant superintendents' communities of practice. The principals' group should partner with the assistant superintendents' own community of practice to talk about their experiences and to help with planning community of practice expansion and facilitation by other principal supervisors. Emphasis should be on how this work differed from the horizontal and vertical groups that the principals previously participated in, and with which the assistant superintendents are familiar. These discussions will help the assistant superintendents decide what should be replicated in other principal groups. This is also an opportunity to

find out from the principals themselves what they need to make their work in these groups impactful and sustainable.

Build the program out with future principal communities integrated by effectiveness. While this pilot group was specifically designed to support the development of middle-tiered principals, such a strategy would not be sufficient as a district-wide approach because it would create principal ability groups that would run counter to both the spirit and function of communities of practice. In the lateral learning design, skill-levels are integrated and multi-dimensional, so the goal is never to establish groups by ability. Moreover, the mixed groups will leverage the expertise of the smaller group of highly functional principals in supporting both middle and lower-tier principals throughout the district. This mixed ability approach should be implemented regardless of the organizing structure that is determined for assigning schools to assistant superintendents (school configuration, grade levels, region, principals choosing supervisor, etc.).

Measuring Success as Efforts Continue and Expand

The current project used research-based leading indicators to determine if the principal and central office projects were effective in these early stages. For principals, that consisted of the project actually addressing the targeted areas of emphasis, their feelings of satisfaction with the project relative to what they had previously experienced, and the replication of what they learned in the project in their own schools. For the central office, cabinet members' perspectives on the success of these efforts were assessed, as well as the degree to which the search process yielded incorporated policies. Going forward, the expectation is that these initiatives should continue to produce these

leading indicators while also increasingly affecting established measures for success and progress toward school and district priorities. Measures that should be monitored in the future are listed here in terms of intermediate and long-term outcomes:

Intermediate Outcomes

- **Teacher attendance.** Teacher attendance is considered here to be a proxy for well-being and job satisfaction, with changes potentially representing the impact of cultural shifts
- **Teaching and learning environment surveys.** This measure will be used to assess the degree to which school environments are hospitable to teaching and learning across nine major domains, including teacher leadership, school leadership, professional development, instructional practices and support, and mentoring (Hirsch, Sioberg, & Germuth, 2010)
- **District culture and effectiveness survey (principals and central office).** Efforts to become a learning organization and install continuous learning communities across district levels should significantly improve principals' perceptions of the central office culture and effectiveness. Central office's self-ratings should improve as well.

Long-Term Outcomes

- **Tripod student surveys.** These surveys will tell us how engaging, rigorous, and effective students perceive their teachers to be.
- **Student attendance.** Student attendance should improve as teaching and organizational practices improve.

- **PSSA and Keystone proficiency and PVAAS ratings.** Provide data on student achievement in terms of school and district-wide proficiency levels, as well as whether students are learning beyond or below their projected growth rates.
- **Graduation rates.** District-wide graduate rates should increase over time.

Implications for Sector

The opportunity to work in Pittsburgh was an opportunity to see the complexities at work in many urban school districts in the sector. Below are several key implications of this work for the broader ecology of the field.

Support before Evaluation

In response to federal and state legislation, many school districts and charter organizations across the country are being required to implement more robust systems of evaluation for teachers. One caution in this development is to carefully consider what becomes of the role of the principal and the principal supervisor. Based on the PPS principal project discussed here, I would caution against framing instructional leadership too narrowly around teacher evaluation. Principals interviewed and observed through the search process felt overwhelmed by the amount of responsibilities they had across the various district initiatives, relative to the amount of holistic support they receive from the central office. Now as the district continues its process of determining how to institutionalize principal evaluations, putting support first is a critical first step, not only because the principals want more mentoring and support but because strong support also actually strengthens accountability, as you can more reasonably hold them accountable to what you have supported them with. In Pittsburgh and abroad, this sector must focus on building support and a growth system with an evaluation component, not an evaluation system with a support component. Elmore (2014) calls for thinking of accountability in terms of “building efficacy and accountability,” and not just “accountability.” He continues:

It is hard—one might say, impossible—for people to be held accountable for things over which they feel they have no control . . . One important thing to understand is that you can't have accountability unless people actually think they can do what you're asking them to do. And they can't believe it's possible to do what you're asking them to do if they don't have the knowledge and the skill to do it. (p. 15)

In sum, sector-wide, supporting principals must be about more than helping them evaluate teachers, and the next phase of school leadership reform cannot be about principal evaluation. We must be heavy on the support lever first, and then assess how well principals use the tools we have effectively provided.

Redefining Principal Supervision

Principal supervisors in boundary-spanning roles are a key lever to central office transformation. This project demonstrates that principal supervisors can play a valuable role in district policy discussions and implementation when they are in close communication with the superintendent. This closeness is effective because it ensures that information from the search process can be shared with and incorporated by district leadership. For central offices with a change agenda, transformation should thus involve creating partnerships between principals and executive-level central office staff via these principal supervisors, in the process refining and aligning performance-oriented central office services to support district-wide instructional improvement. Principal supervisors in this dynamic represent a connection to central office leadership specifically purposed to build their capacity for better performance, with a focus on the learning-centered partnerships described earlier.

This paradigm shift is important, given what many principals in the field report feeling. Among both my principal participants and in the broader research, principals have expressed that their relationship with the central office can feel as if it is about managing an “endless supply of new policies, programs, and procedures,” (Fullan, 1997, p. 7). Fullan (1997) notes that this problematic condition sets up “the expectation that principals should be the leaders in the implementation of changes which they have no hand in developing and may not understand,” (p.7). Yet when the boundary-spanning role is maximized through the search process and the search process is effective, the threat of this voicelessness is significantly reduced for principals. In sum, districts sector-wide must be transformed in ways that replace fragmented demands and incoherence with a learning-focused partnership scaffolded by boundary-crossing agents.

Principal supervisors’ role in professional development. Lateral learning is vastly underutilized as a professional development tool in districts nationwide. In many districts, professional development for teachers and for principals is highly centralized and vertical. The results of this study confirm research suggesting that some of the most powerful learning occurs between peers rather than in formal training programs. This work calls for an end to principals learning and working in isolation, and for them to form communities of practice where lateral learning is at a premium. Principals can then work on forming other communities of practice, both with and among their teachers. This will help to cultivate complex leadership development skills in principals that include both technical and adaptive practices, which will ensure that all principals know how to collaborate closely with teachers, colleagues, students, parents, and community members.

Invest in Continuous Learning Teams across Levels of a District

As noted in the implications for site, establishing continuous learning teams across district levels is a critically important complement to redefining the principal supervisor role discussed above. These efforts have value for improving student outcomes by creating the conditions necessary for sustained norms of continuous and adaptive adult learning, which in turn has a positive impact on student learning. This process provides the principal supervisor's bifurcated strategy with the support and cultural undergirding it needs at the district level, which produces long-term sustainability and a positive impact. A key mechanism in the continuous learning team effect is collective responsibility, which begins to emerge from the interdependence experienced in this lateral learning teamwork and should be cultivated further and protected as the teams evolve.

These approaches are in many ways foreign to the education sector and are not typical points of investment, yet they have great potential to have an impact. The seeds of this have been seen here in Pittsburgh, and we have seen the more established results in other districts across the country (Honig et al., 2010). Thus, these ideas as applied in the education sector are in a nascent but promising stage and will need large-scale financial and political support for monitoring, training, and adapting cross-contextual implementation.

Investing in People: The Need for a Dual Focus

Lastly, evidence from this project coalesces with emerging research to suggest that, to achieve optimal performance, districts must pay attention not only to the instructional leadership of their principals but also to their personal growth. Dr. Lane has

made such a commitment in Pittsburgh, and this emphasis on personal growth must be incorporated across the sector at every level of the system. The key in such efforts is recognizing the interdependence of personal mastery work and the explicit work of teaching, learning, and leading that is needed to raise student achievement (Kegan, 2014). Moreover, how well educators perform at their jobs and how well they develop as individuals not only are interdependent dimensions, they also rely on the structures that are built into the culture and operations of educational organizations (Kegan, 2014). The demands that are put on adults in the education sector today are unprecedented (Wagner, Kegan 2006), and given these increasingly uncharted adaptive demands, the sector at large, and the districts that are subject to its mandates, cannot continue to focus solely on student achievement in the absence of the personal development that its practitioners need to actualize these results.

Implications for Self

Through my work in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, I have had the opportunity to reflect on the implications of what I've learned for my current and future educational leadership practice. As with my project organization, these reflections have a dual focus on the inner and outer work of personal mastery and leadership development, respectively.

Lessons from My Own Outer Work

Conflict of entrance: Balancing learning stance versus the leadership call.

Before I try to influence an organization on any level as an authority with the power to “tell” members what to do, I have committed to first fully understand the context, gather firsthand data, and “get messy” in the difficult work and lives of the people I seek to impact. I have found that these meaningful connections deepen my learning and become the cornerstone for my actions. For me it's about a fundamental value of respect, of not wanting to feel like a “colonizer,” and to embrace, value, and honor what I find when I get there and seek to engage others in the need for their own transformation.

However, in the course of this capstone project, there was tension between my ability to stay in that learning stance and the urgent need for me to assume leadership in a project that would be impactful for the schools, students, and district priorities here in Pittsburgh. This meant that I would lead others, in this case the principals, without having the time to study their context, history, and organizational culture as I had been fortunate to do in previous experiences. As noted in the layered experience discussion, before I was a teacher I spent a year as a co-teacher, and before I was a principal I spent a year

shadowing a principal. In this case, while my study of the superintendency was supported by Dr. Lane's guidance and mentoring, my role as a cabinet member and initiative leader was scaffolded by only three months of study before I had to start leading. Ironically, the lesson for me here more than ever before was to manage a continuous learning cycle through reflection and double-loop learning, and to try to be humble, thankful, and respectful of my colleagues and the leaders in my care.

I also recognize that I was fortunate to have had expansive learning opportunities in my previous experiences. It is unlikely that I will ever again have a year, or even the three months I had here, to operate in a situation where learning itself is the goal, free of official leadership responsibilities. Thus, the experience I gained here of balancing being both a continuous learner and a leader prepares me well for the likely situation I will face in future opportunities.

To tell or not to tell: Balancing lateral learning with direct instruction. When I started the principal project, I was very conscious of the importance of staying constructivist and of not resorting to "telling," even when my expertise made me want to tell. This was especially true in areas such as classroom observations, where it was challenging to let principals develop their ability to see patterns when I wanted to tell them what those patterns were. Challenges in this area were fueled by the fact that I was new at coaching experienced principals, and I wanted to do it well. Ultimately, in my quest to be a more constructivist teacher, I actually relied too much on the coaching and the lateral learning, which undermined the attention I gave to their building factual knowledge, which is a part of my learning theory. In considering instructional rounds (City et al., 2009), for example, the group would have been better served by having direct

instruction on the topic and then establishing the practice together, rather than my trying to teach it piecemeal across seven individual principals and learning design elements. This challenge has implications for my future principal support work, as I know I need to get better at moving flexibly between a commitment to constructivist learning and the judicious use of direct teaching elements.

Lessons from My Own Inner Work

Overcoming self-doubt. When faced with such an adaptive challenge in the context of working on the central office cultural transformation, it became clear to me that the knowledge I needed to persist and to begin to see hints of success was created in the actual act of working on it. Indeed, Elmore (2014a) notes that the most important and meaningful work can be the work we are least confident about. He writes, “The work is as much, or more, about *learning* to do the work as it is about actually doing it” (p. 2). This challenge of confidence was true for the work I took on at the central office, where my efforts at times were accompanied by tremendous feelings of uncertainty and insecurity, which often included negative mind chatter like, “This is so stupid, it’s never going to work . . . I’m going to quit now . . . This is the last time I’m going to try this . . . How am I going to do this?”

Throughout this process I had to internalize the fact that my discomfort was the nature of the adaptive challenges we should expect to find in this work. Embracing that understanding was most salient in trying to incorporate reflection both at the beginning of cabinet meetings as a feedback loop for our team’s learning, and at the end. My initial read was that it got a lukewarm reception, yet in collecting data to evaluate the project, I was surprised to see that people generally felt positive about this element. Moreover, the

day I was ready to give up was frequently referred to in the feedback as a day that was particularly impactful. Thus I learned that the challenging nature of this work means I will not always feel masterful when I am being effective. Given the uncertainty inherent in these processes, courage and perseverance are essential to doing good work. As a leader, this calls for pushing through negative mind chatter and self-doubt while simultaneously trying to inspire others to work alongside me in the same way. It also means, however, getting out of my head and testing my assumptions with data and evidence on the situation. I now have a new understanding of the degree of courage and inquiry needed to face the inevitable adaptive challenges of system-level leadership in education.

The implications of future orientation. As part of my work with the principals, we all shared the results of the Strengthsfinder (Rath, 2007) personal strengths inventory. One of my dominant strengths was future orientation, which Rath describes this way: “You are the kind of person who loves to peer over the horizon. The future fascinates you. As if it were projected on the wall, you see in detail what the future might hold, and this detailed picture keeps pulling you forward, into tomorrow” (p. 105). Engaging in self-reflection in the context of the leadership work I was doing at PPS was powerful because it crystalized and gave voice to something I only had a vague sense of in my approach to my work as a leader—that my tendency and passion in leading others is in seeing the potential in people and in situations. Although I work with urgency in the present, I am very focused on future outcomes and realized hopes for those in my care.

In reflecting on my practice, I see that for me leadership is inherently developmental. I recognize that I have always tried to leverage my big picture view as

part of my work to develop other leaders. In my mind I am preparing, shaping, and cultivating leaders for a reality that does not yet exist, but one that they can shape and help bring about. I inherently work with an orientation toward a human capital leadership pipeline—meaning that I am always developing leaders to replace me. As a school leader, I trained teachers in a way that would prepare them to be principals, and in this project, I worked with the principals not only as though they will lead their teachers in new ways but also with the possibility in mind that they may one day become principal leaders.

Being future oriented certainly has implications for my own future. This revelation has helped me realize that, as I seek opportunities in the future, I will prioritize those that give me an opportunity to engage in leadership development work. This does not necessarily mean that I will be in a trainer or leadership program administrator capacity, but it does mean that as I consider leadership opportunities I will be asking developmentally oriented questions about those in my care, such as who they are, what their goals and aspirations are, and what potential impact they can have in the sector as leaders into the future.

Landings and steps: The uneven process of personal and professional development. This capstone project has been a marriage of two identities: one that I am comfortable with and feel rooted in, and one that I have had to take up as part of this work. I perceive myself as continuing to thrive as a practitioner much more than as a scholar. I feel that in my natural element I am pragmatic, intuitive, action-oriented, subjective, and connected. Yet as researcher I have felt the need to become much of what Lawrence-Lightfoot (2012) has said about the role: more conceptual, contemplative,

counter-intuitive, distant, and detached. Thus, the capstone project has brought these two identities together, and this synergy has helped me realize that my identity and where my calling takes me are not static; they will evolve and take me to places outside my comfort zone, even if they are inside my professional mission.

My years before attending Harvard were fairly stable. I belonged to a church and a school community for many of them, and I relied on the familiarity of my faith and my position or title to define me, thus I did not have to explain much to be understood or known by others. In sum, I had been in a period of stasis. A comfortable landing place to rest, to practice, to solidify, to feel grounded, to establish, and to build. My time in the EdLD program has been anything but all that, as I have struggled with the academic identity and very discomfoting expectations around capacity and voice. While this cycle affords me periods of establishing and building, it's also very disruptive and dynamic. It requires full engagement, constantly intuiting and discerning, reading the signs for the next move, transition. This project has made this cycle very real to me, and has made me realize that as my career evolves there will be more complex steps to take and more far-reaching landing places. More importantly, the recognition that these personal and professional steps inherently involve stretching and discomfort helps me to anticipate them, and in so doing to focus on learning rather than merely coping, and to ultimately use the wisdom gained from previous steps to embrace my continuous growth and thus be transformed.

Conclusion

“People are rejecting leaders who rule by the formal authority of their position and command by hierarchical power . . . They are craving genuine leadership—leaders who lead by their moral authority to inspire, to elevate others and to enlist us in a shared journey.” —Siedman, as quoted in Friedman, 2013

This quote was written about Nelson Mandela shortly after his passing, and it resonated deeply with me as I was working with my principal group. This group was on a journey to become more genuine leaders who use their personal stories to fuel their moral authority and to inspire and uplift others. The work has been powerfully moving, as these principals have opened their doors, their minds, and their hearts to the joint work in which we engaged. The journey of this work embodied the key question about leadership development that educators face, especially as they move further from the classroom context: how do educational leaders achieve the wider impact on student achievement that so many of us strive for? In fact, some have asked how much principal leadership, and even more how much district leadership, actually impact student achievement. How much do these individuals, now multiple levels removed from the student-teacher exchange, actually affect that learning transaction? Elmore (2014a) offers an answer in this description of his most essential principle of school improvement strategy: “The problems of the system are the problems of the smallest unit . . . all actions of the system at large have to be evaluated in terms of the value they add to the instructional core—the relationship between the teacher and student in the presence of content,” (p. 12).

The American education system is currently facing multiple well-publicized dilemmas—from predicted human resource deficits in the STEM fields, to global achievement gaps, to racial disparities here at home. In the face of these crises,

uncountable remedies have been offered and tested. In terms of the PPS principal project, there is admittedly still much to learn about how this adaptive leadership approach for the adults in the system impacts student achievement. However, we do know that when a teacher's skill and knowledge increase, it has a positive impact on the instructional core, and on that essential transaction between teacher and student. Furthermore, drawing from what has been seen in effective organizations and in the practices of successful leaders across sectors, this work holds that if the investment is on supervisors' learning and the principals, a system can readily create multiple pathways to improving the instructional core in our schools.

It is true that in most pockets of effective urban schools, we see effective leaders. It is also true that it has been difficult as a nation to promote sustained, district-level educational improvement. In the resulting quest to figure out a way to improve student achievement at scale, we are unfortunately experiencing what Elmore (2014) calls reform “du jour”: with limited operational budgets but urgent calls for high achievement, everyone wants to find convenient solutions that “do not require educators to reach deeply into their own practice, to question their basic beliefs about how children learn, or much less to alter their behavior in regard to children” (p. 8). In the face of these quick fix tendencies, the brand of reform I have advocated throughout this paper calls for all educators at every level of the system—teachers, school leaders, and central office staff—to reflect deeply on their practice. It is through such reflection that we learn to self-diagnose our own limitations and strengths as the first step in recognizing our own growth and learning needs. It also leads us to question our own beliefs about how children and adults learn, and provides a space where system leaders can create the

conditions in which adults can transform their practice in ways that align with those beliefs.

To be clear, these processes do not exclude accountability for raising student achievement. On the contrary, ensuring a quality education for all children requires a strong evaluation system. But that system must start with support, and then hold everyone in the system accountable not only for performance but for being a learner, and for working collaboratively with others to continuously grow their practice. I agree that it is important to identify and deal with incompetent and unsuitable teachers, principals, principal supervisors and professional staff at every level. Yet the reality of human resources tells us that we need to be even more concerned with the committed teachers and principals who are working hard but are not seeing the desired results. The findings here suggest that supporting this group requires starting in a place other than accountability. We need to start with building supportive relationships and truly caring about the people who are doing the hard work we have described. We must maintain the transparency and openness to make the practice more human. Pittsburgh Public Schools has begun this work and must keep it going. This will require that we as leaders across the sector have the courage to examine where we are making mistakes and do our best to correct them. Rotherham (2010) notes that principals have a multiplier effect and that an investment in our leaders at all levels is an investment in our students.

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Appendix A: Principal Focus Group Interview Protocol

Introduction

Thank you so much for participating in this focus group. I really appreciate it! Just a couple of reminders:

- The responses here will be kept confidential. In the actual capstone I will use pseudonyms for each of you, so please be as open as possible here.
- I have a number of questions that I would like to get through, but this can also be a free-flowing conversation. So, you can also feel free to weigh in with topics that come to mind as we go through the discussion points.
- Whenever possible, use examples when responding to the questions. I will try to remember to prompt you if it seems like one would be helpful, but just note that examples will be super helpful.
- With your permission, I would like to record this conversation. Again, your responses will be confidential but recording will really help me analyze the information more systematically and best represent the work you've done.
- Any questions before I start recording? Ok, thanks again. Let's begin.

Questions

1. In general, how would you describe the way your experience in this initiative has felt so far?
2. One of the things we've wanted to focus on here was leadership style. How would you describe your leadership style?
3. Has this experience begun to impact your leadership style? (Examples?)
4. What can you say you've learned about assessing your own strengths and weaknesses or growth as a leader, if anything?
5. We've at times also talked about using your **story of self** as a leader with the people in your care. Has anyone tried it? How did you do it and how did it go? Did you talk about race? How did that go? (Examples?)
6. We've also spent time talking about barriers that we may have that get in the way of our personal development. Has anyone identified barriers as they've been a part of this project? Assumptions or beliefs that might hold you back? Has anyone worked to overturn these barriers (immunities)? (Examples?)
7. Part of the goal for this work is to not only do it for ourselves, but then as leaders to turn around and do it with our staff and people in our care. Has anyone begun doing that? How has that gone so far? (Examples?)
8. Has this work impacted your instructional leadership? If so, how? (Examples?)
9. Has this work impacted how you recognize and interpret the challenges to success in your school? If so, how? Have you thought about actions to take? (Examples?)

10. Has this initiative at all helped you recognize strengths in your school that you were not already aware of? (Examples?)
11. One of the things that has been said about the district is that principals feel they do not have a voice, or are scared to express themselves to upper leadership. Prior to this experience, was that true for any of you? IF so, has it changed at all through this experience? (Examples?)
12. Sometimes we have things at our jobs that we're asked to do by the higher ups that we actually don't think make sense. How have you responded to that kind of scenario in the past? How do you now? (Examples?)
13. Has this group here felt like a community? How? How has being a part of this community impacted your approach to your work, if at all? (Examples?)
14. Ultimately, this work might feel good but it only really matters if it is going to affect student success. Do you think this work will impact students? If so, which aspects will? How? (Examples?)
 - a. Are there any that you think will not help students much? Why not?
15. I'd like to talk about differences between this ongoing support and ongoing support that you were receiving as principals from the district prior to now. Let me specify that I mean ongoing support, not your initial principal training.
 - a. What did you learn about your leadership style in past professional development efforts? How was that different from what we have done in this project? (Examples?)
 - b. What about your areas of strength and growth? How did the district's previous support help you understand these areas? (Examples?)
 - c. Was the story of self or anything like it something you discussed in those prior support experiences? If so how? (Examples?)
 - d. We talked about understanding the barriers to achievement that your schools faced. How did your prior support efforts help you to understand and conceptualize those barriers? (Examples?)
 - i. How has this initiative done that? How is it different? (Examples?)
 - e. How has the approach to instructional leadership been different in this support versus prior support? What were the emphases before? What are they now? (Examples?)
 - f. Have there been any efforts at developing a community of practice among you up until this project? What were they like? How is this different? (Examples?)

Appendix B: Open-Ended Questions to Cabinet Members

As part of my data collection for my capstone project I was hoping that you can answer the following questions by close of business on Wednesday. I know that you are super busy but if you can just take a few minutes to reflect on my voice/participation in cabinet I would greatly appreciate it. Many thanks in advance! Best, Alison

1. Do you think the decision making protocol has impacted the effectiveness of executive cabinet? Why or Why not?
2. Do you think that ending our meetings by reflecting on our learning- what facilitated it or what got in our way is helping us as a team?
3. Are there any values or norms that you think that I consistently model or advocate for that have the potential to add value to or improve our norms?
4. Anything else you would like to say about my work and role here as it pertains to central office culture?

Appendix C: Principal Mixed Method Online Survey

PPS Experiences PRIOR to the Self-Reflecting Soul Sisters

Thank you for participating in the Self-reflecting Soul Sisters survey! I appreciate your feedback, it will go a long way to improving the quality of our experiences in this group. The survey is not very long and should take you only 15 minutes to complete. It is also totally anonymous, so your honest responses are greatly appreciated as well. The survey begins on the next page. Thanks again!

Experiences PRIOR to Self-reflecting Soul Sisters

The Questions in Section 1 of this survey relate to your experiences as a principal in PPS prior to participating in the Self-reflecting Soul Sisters. Thus, for the following questions, please consider your experiences as a PPS Principal PRIOR TO THE SELF-REFLECTING SOUL SISTERS INITIATIVE and respond with your level of agreement with the following statements.

***1. PRIOR TO THE SELF-REFLECTING SOUL SISTERS INITIATIVE, the professional development I received as a principal in PPS was effective.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

***2. PRIOR TO THE SELF-REFLECTING SOUL SISTERS INITIATIVE, at PPS I learned about my own leadership style through district sponsored professional development activities.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

***3. PRIOR TO THE SELF-REFLECTING SOUL SISTERS INITIATIVE, in PPS I felt that I was a part of a collegial community of practice.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

***4. PRIOR TO THE SELF-REFLECTING SOUL SISTERS INITIATIVE, I felt supported in my personal growth by Central Office.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

***5. PRIOR TO THE SELF-REFLECTING SOUL SISTERS INITIATIVE, I felt supported by Central Office in my efforts to provide effective instructional support to my teachers.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

***6. PRIOR TO THE SELF-REFLECTING SOUL SISTERS INITIATIVE, I was effectively trained by PPS in diagnosing problems that inhibit student achievement in my school.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

Your Self-reflecting Soul Sisters Experience

The questions in this section relate directly to your participation in the Self-reflecting Soul Sisters. Please state your level of agreement with the following statements as they pertain to YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THE SELF-REFLECTING SOUL SISTERS.

***7. I believe the Self-reflecting Soul Sisters initiative effectively supports participating schools to achieve the district's goals.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

***8. I believe the Self-reflecting Soul Sisters initiative has an environment of teamwork.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

***9. I believe the Self-reflecting Soul Sisters initiative has an environment of trust.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

***10. I feel as though I'm able to be creative and innovative in the work I perform.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

***11. I feel as though my suggestions and inputs are heard in the Self-reflecting Soul Sisters initiative.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

***12. My capacity to raise student achievement is strong.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

***13. I effectively leverage existing Self-reflecting Soul Sisters initiative resources to improve student achievement at my school.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

***14. I routinely communicate my support needs to the leadership of the Self-reflecting Soul Sisters.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

***15. I feel a sense of partnership between my school and the Self-reflecting Soul Sisters initiative to improve student achievement.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

***16. I spend time and effort finding ways to work around rather than with the Self-reflecting Soul Sisters initiative to focus on student achievement issues.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

***17. The professional development I received as a part of the Self-reflecting Soul Sisters has been effective.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

***18. I learned about my own leadership style through the Soul Search Sisters Initiative.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

***19. I felt that in the Self-reflecting Soul Sisters Initiative I am a part of a collegial community of practice.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

20. I feel supported in my personal growth by the Self-reflecting Soul Sisters Initiative.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

***21. I feel supported by the Self-reflecting Soul Sisters Initiative in my efforts to provide effective instructional support to my teachers.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

***22. I feel effectively trained by the Self-reflecting Soul Sisters Initiative in diagnosing problems that inhibit student achievement in my school.**

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

Lastly, Just Two Open Ended Questions

Please respond to these two open-ended questions by writing out your response. Your thoughtfulness here is greatly appreciated.

23. Sometimes you may have things you are asked to do by central office that you don't actually think will fulfill the needs of the students in your school. If that has happened to you, prior to participating in the Self-reflecting Soul Sisters how have you responded to that kind of scenario at PPS? How do you now?

24. How has the approach to instructional leadership support in the Self-reflecting Soul Sisters been different from what you have previously experienced in PPS? Please be as specific as possible.

Appendix D: Khan's Pit Stop Form (2009, pp. 218-219)

PIT STOP FORM

For each of the nine categories listed below, please circle the number that reflects your assessment of your team's performance to this point. Make notes, where appropriate, of specific examples of behavior or interaction that serve as the basis for your assessment.

1. LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

POOR		FAIR		GOOD		EXCELLENT
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

This team actively encourages the learning and development of its members. We make good use of the different abilities, knowledge, and experience that each of us brings to it.

This team pays little attention to the learning and development of its member. We do not make good use of the abilities each member brings to the group.

Notes:

2. GOAL CLARITY AND AGREEMENT

POOR		FAIR		GOOD		EXCELLENT
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Our goals are unstated, confused, conflicting, and/or ambiguous.

Our goals are clear to all and shared by all. We all care about our team goals and are committed.

Notes:

3. INFORMAL LEADERSHIP AND CONTROL

POOR		FAIR		GOOD		EXCELLENT
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Control rests with just a few. They call all the shots and the rest of us just follow. One or two people tend to dominate all our discussions, regardless of the task at hand.

Control tends to be shared within our group. Influence is based on skill and performance. Initiatives shift from one person to another, depending upon the tasks at hand.

Notes:

POOR		FAIR		GOOD		EXCELLENT
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Decisions are made by one or two members, or by a subgroup. We have a low level of overall commitment to solutions.

Consensus is sought and tested. Different ideas are integrated into team solutions. We have a high level of commitment to solutions.

Notes:

5. FEEDBACK

POOR		FAIR		GOOD		EXCELLENT
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

We all seek and give feedback to each other on how we think we are doing and what we think we could do better.

Our team seldom checks to see how we are doing or what it is that might be keeping us from getting where we want to go. We just plow forward.

Notes:

6. CONFLICT

POOR		FAIR		GOOD		EXCELLENT
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

In our team, conflict is avoided, minimized, or smoothed over. Open disagreements turn into angry exchanges that are usually left unresolved.

We accept conflicts as inevitable. We express our differences openly and politely. Then we try to work them through to mutually satisfactory solutions.

Notes:

Figure 10.1 Continued