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## School Administrator

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# Reculturing the Central Office

How Washington's Highline district is transforming central administration's role in supporting its 39 schools to improve instruction

BY SUSAN ENFIELD AND ALAN SPICCIATI

Most of us remember the classic Charlie Brown cartoons, in which adults are simply invisible figures who provide nothing more than background noise. For many of us who began our teaching careers more than a decade ago, this might be an apt analogy for how we viewed the superintendent and central office from our vantage point in schools.

Who they were did not matter because whatever they did seemed so far removed from our classrooms. But times have changed and so, too, have the mission and focus of the central office.



Superintendent Susan Enfield (center) and Chief Accountability Officer Alan Spicciati (to her left)

Ask most central-office administrators today what their core mission is, and they likely will cite improving teaching and learning in schools. Teachers expect their superintendents to make decisions that support the work they do with students. Families expect their school district leaders, along with building principals and teachers, to ensure their children receive the highest quality instruction possible.

These expectations, combined with increasing accountability demands at the federal and state levels, have resulted in central offices transitioning from being bureaucratic and compliance-focused to being mission-driven and results-focused.

In Highline Public Schools, we have embraced this change and are restructuring and reculturing our organization so that all central-office staff see themselves in service to

meet with other administrators in Highline Public Schools in Burien, Wash.

schools. As a result, we have reallocated resources, redefined the role of the principal, and engaged our community in developing a plan that delivers on our promise of knowing every student by name, strength and need.

### Setting the Stage

Highline is a highly diverse system 15 miles south of Seattle serving almost 19,000 students, 72 percent of whom qualify for free and reduced-priced meals. We believe our students' potential is greater than whatever challenges they face. Together, our staff and community spent most of last year developing an ambitious, no-excuses strategic plan that reflects our belief in our students' abilities.

What makes this plan so significant is not simply the bold 95 percent achievement and graduation rate targets we have set, but rather the shift it requires in the role of the central office. To achieve our ambitious, newly adopted goals, we had to rethink not only what we did but how we did it — and we knew we couldn't do it alone. Fortunately, we didn't have to.

Highline has a long history of partnering with the University of Washington's College of Education, and professors Meredith Honig and Michael Copland have been the leading experts on the role of central office in school improvement. Their 2010 study of three school districts nationwide revealed how superintendents and their leadership teams transformed "the central office into a support system to help all schools improve the quality of teaching and learning."

As former teachers and now central-office leaders, this research has resonated with us since its publication. Now it serves as a guide for transforming our own work and, in doing so, our school system.

With Honig's help, our first step was to become clear as a leadership team how the central office can work together to strengthen instruction. Early in our discussions, two strong beliefs took hold.

First and most important, we agreed that the central office adds value not merely through "service with a smile" or even through efficiency — though both are obviously important — but also through a more active role in strengthening school leadership. Gone are the days of central-office bureaucracy, and so, too, is the "let a thousand flowers bloom" philosophy of decentralization. The central office now must play a pivotal role in ensuring a strong system of schools, and embracing this shift prepared us for the strategic work of transformation.

### A Theory of Action

Any systemic improvement effort rests on a theory of action. Based on the research and our own experiences, our theory of action is this: If central-office staff put the conditions in place for principals to be effective instructional leaders and building managers, then principals in turn can put the conditions in place for teachers to be effective in meeting the needs of each learner so all students are known by name, strength and need and graduate prepared to choose their future.

Naming the primary responsibility of the central office as supporting principals helped us focus on two fronts — growing principal instructional leadership capacity and removing barriers that keep principals from focusing on instruction. This became the core of our transformation work and provided us with a focus for developing a plan to create a high-functioning, pro-active system of support services to schools.

We started small by providing all central-office staff members with the superintendent's expectations for the central office. These "quick win" practices were intended to support principals and build central-office credibility while the deeper, more powerful central-office reforms were being developed. Examples include responding to principal requests within 24 hours and adopting a stance of "working toward yes." These may seem obvious, but a single, lengthy e-mail chain of central-office staff raising bureaucratic hurdles can quickly erode principals' trust.

Another expectation core to the entire philosophy of central-office transformation was providing a rationale with all communication. We learned early on that the old, bureaucratic model of the central office is *telling*, while the new, capacity-building approach is *teaching*. This shift in mindset turns every meeting and every memo into an opportunity to develop a clearer organizational focus on how everything we do is in service of supporting student achievement.

### Defining Principals' Roles

Supporting principals as instructional leaders demands talented central-office leaders whose foremost responsibility is doing just that. Traditionally, the role of principal supervisor has offered principals autonomy within broad oversight. Models such as the area superintendent role emphasize supervision of a

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wide array of functions, from budget compliance to parent complaints. While the best area superintendents develop their principals' leadership skills, few have the time or expertise to develop their principals' ability to help teachers improve their instructional practice. [resources](#)

In Highline, we have renamed our principal supervisors as instructional leadership executive directors, or ILEDs. This role is as important as any in the success of our transformation, and we have reorganized our central office to maximize their time spent developing and supporting principals.

We started by prioritizing resources to hire four ILEDs this year, compared to only two or three in prior years. This provides them with a manageable, and many would say enviable, assignment of working with only nine principals each.

Additionally, ILEDs have no other major duties, and their committee roles are kept to a minimum, allowing them to spend at least three days a week in their schools, meeting with principals and visiting classrooms.

The primary responsibility of the instructional leadership executive director is to build our principals' capacity as instructional leaders both in and outside the classroom to improve student learning and achievement. They do this by:

Working one on one with principals as partners to develop and accelerate their instructional leadership capacity through differentiated support;

- Developing principal professional learning networks focused on principals learning and sharing instructional leadership practices;
- Providing and brokering professional development for principals based on both individual and collective learning needs;
- Providing and brokering support for principals in accessing services from instructional and operational central-office departments;
- Working with principals to understand and use various data to improve teaching and learning; and
- Modeling effective leadership practices that lead to improved instruction.

Building instructional expertise in principals requires us to do the same with our ILEDs. Just as our principals need intentional support and professional development, so, too, do our ILEDs if we expect them to ensure the quality of leadership and instruction in the schools they supervise.

To provide this level of tailored support, we are using our partnership with the University of Washington's Center for Educational Leadership. Our ILEDs receive one-on-one coaching and engage in monthly professional development sessions with the university center training personnel and other central-office staff. This ongoing investment in our ILEDs is essential.

### Beyond Compliance

Redefining the role of those who support principals forms the cornerstone of central-office transformation, but it quickly becomes apparent that ILEDs and principals will only succeed if the rest of its central-office staff transform their role as well. It is impossible for principals and their supervisors to change without other district functions changing and adapting.

The research on central-office transformation challenges all central-office departments, from human resources to finance to teaching and learning, to adopt a case-management approach to supporting schools. (Notably, we relied on "Central Office Transformation for District-Wide Teaching and Learning Improvement," a 2010 report by Meredith Honig, Michael Copland and others.) This means that rather than central-office staff focusing on simply completing tasks traditionally associated with their jobs, they instead begin learning what it is schools need from them. In doing so, they also begin to see themselves as an integral part of the mission of the system — improving teaching and learning across all schools.

We still have significant work to do in making the shift to being a central office committed to continuous improvement rather than focused on compliance. Yet, this shift is absolutely essential if we are to become a system that truly serves all students. To do this, however, requires us to not only fight the age-old stereotypes of the traditional central office, but also challenge the byzantine set of state and federal policies that were designed for another era but still govern us today. We must define our new reality by redefining our own roles as central-office leaders. Our students are counting on us.



Highline Public Schools Superintendent Susan Enfield (left) is working with Meredith Honig, an education professor at University of Washington, on redefining central-office roles and relationships.

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