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Characteristics of Instructionally Effective School Districts

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ABSTRACT In this article we present findings from our exploratory study of 12 instructionally effective school districts (IESD) in California. Districts were identified on the basis of their ability to promote high levels of student achievement on standardized tests (aggregated to the district level) after controlling for socioeconomic status, previous achievement, and language proficiency. Studies on school improvement and organizational control and coordination provided the theories and frameworks that informed the study. The primary emphasis was on analysis of organizational structures and coupling mechanisms rather than on cultural linkages. Results are based on interviews with superintendents and analyses of selected documents. Seventeen themes or characteristics found in these IESD are discussed under the categories of (1) conditions, (2) climate factors, (3) characteristics of curriculum and instruction, and (4) organizational dynamics. Information about variations in these themes is also presented.

We found a higher than anticipated degree of coordination between district, school, and classroom in the areas of curriculum and instruction. We also discovered that superintendents were actively engaged in technical core operations.

In general, research on school districts and superintendents has been sparse (Bridges, 1982; Crowson, 1987; Murphy & Hallinger, 1986). There has been little analysis of the educational effects produced by district level activities (Herriot & Muse, 1972). In addition, few of the new effectiveness researchers have devoted themselves to uncovering district practices and characteristics associated with important student outcomes (Cuban, 1984; Rowan, 1983). Finally, almost no research is available that shows how districts, in their efforts to promote organizational goals, coordinate the work of school-level personnel (Crowson & Morris, 1984; Firestone, 1984; Peterson, 1983).

Articles written about the role of districts in promoting greater instructional effectiveness have generally followed one of three approaches. First, from the research on effective schools and school improvement, Purkey and Smith (1983), Finn (1983), and Clark, Lotto, and Astuto (1984), have extrapolated district strategies

for promoting instructionally effective schools. Second, others have constructed district policies and practices for promoting educational improvement from the expanding body of recent literature (Murphy, Mesa, & Hallinger, 1984). Finally, still others have suggested a district role for promoting educational effectiveness through analysis of organizational coupling (Murphy & Hallinger, 1984).

These approaches to generating strategies for districts to use in increasing their instructional effectiveness have all been helpful. However, they cannot substitute for research that examines instructionally effective school districts (IESD) directly. In a way, the lack of direct research on IESD is surprising. Given the progression of the instructionally effective schools research from studies on teacher effects (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1981), one might have assumed that by this time effectiveness researchers would have turned their attention to the factors that promote instructionally effective districts. Also because of the growing acceptance of studying organizations as "nested layers" (Barr, Dreeben, & Wiratchai, 1983), continued absence of attention to district level activities is difficult to explain. Finally, in his classic review of research on educational administration, Bridges (1982) specifically pointed out that research focusing on the district level was sorely needed. Nonetheless, widespread acceptance of his challenge appears to have gone unheeded.

Frameworks and Methodology

With this as the background, we decided to conduct an investigation of IESD. Our objectives were three-fold: to develop a better understanding of (a) the factors and processes that characterize IESD, (b) the role of the superintendent in promoting IESD, and (c) the methods used by district offices to coordinate and control the work activities of school level personnel, especially prin-

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cipals. Complete descriptions of the theories and frameworks that informed the study, as well as the strengths and limitations of the methodology employed, are available elsewhere (Murphy, Peterson, & Hallinger, 1986; Murphy, Hallinger, Peterson, & Lotto, 1987). Here we only want to point out the major caveats that should guide the reader progressing through the paper. The results presented below are based primarily on interviews with the superintendents from the 12 effective districts in the study—5 elementary, 3 high school, and 4 unified. These 12 were among the most effective in California in promoting student achievement, after controlling for socioeconomic status, on standardized tests in reading, mathematics, and language. Samples of the following documents, provided by district office personnel, were analyzed as a check on the accuracy of superintendents' self-reports: district and school goal statements, agendas and minutes from district office meetings for principals, and evaluations of principals. Still, it is important to treat the trends discussed below as tentative and exploratory. Additional checks on self-report data would be helpful. More importantly, much greater exploration is needed on the question of whether the beliefs and perceptions characteristic of the superintendent's office actually permeate and influence other parts of the district structure and the school and classroom levels of the organization.

In addition, we should note that the primary purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of findings as they relate to the first research objective. In presenting the findings in this format, in-depth analysis of individual characteristics is not possible. Neither can much attention be devoted to describing findings on the second and third research objectives (see Murphy & Hallinger, 1986; Murphy et al., 1987; Peterson, Murphy & Hallinger, 1987). Much of the richness and complexity of schools as formal organizations is, perforce, not treated. It should also be made clear that in the analysis of these IESD, we focused more on bureaucratic structures than on cultural linkages. A more comprehensive analysis would include additional attention to the cultural aspects of organizational effectiveness and to the interaction between bureaucratic and cultural linkages (see Astuto & Clark, 1985; Firestone & Wilson, 1985).

The trends found in these IESD are analyzed below.

Conditions

The following three conditions appeared throughout the districts in the study.

Labor peace. Major problems between teachers and administrators were not being experienced in any of the districts. Our impression was that in about one third of the districts, teacher-administrator relations appeared to be quite positive. In the remainder, they appeared to

fall somewhere between nonnegative and good. However, in none of the districts were severe strains and tensions evident.

Board support. In all of the districts, the Board of Education could be characterized as falling somewhere on a continuum between noninterference and supportiveness. There was little evidence of the lack of consensus and support between the superintendent and the Board that characterizes some districts. Board supportiveness should not be confused with acquiescence. In general, we were surprised by the strong role played by the boards in these districts. In two of the districts, the boards played a significant role in forming district direction. In two other districts, the level of direct involvement in the goal formulation and inspection processes was more active than our experiences in districts lead us to expect.

Community acceptance. The districts in this study were at peace with the larger communities in which they operated. Although many of the districts had diverse subcommunities to serve, they all seemed to be effective in creating or nurturing community acceptance for their activities. Although it was occasionally active, generally this acceptance was passive.

Climate Factors

A number of patterns that characterized the environment or culture of these districts emerged during analysis. The most significant of these are presented briefly below.

Productivity focus. Improving student learning was the top priority in these districts and the usual litany of excuses about why high levels of achievement could not be attained were conspicuous by their absence. But these districts did not limit their efforts to promoting student achievement. Superintendents expected excellence in all undertakings, and they did not rein in their expectations about what could be accomplished simply because achievement was emphasized. The superintendents' responses to the question asking them about their one informal goal for their districts best illustrate the focus on accomplishments—three answered to have the best district "in the valley," "in Northern California," and "in the state"; two others said their goals were to "improve our test scores" and "to get to the 99th percentile on the standardized tests." Although we have no direct support for the belief that IESD parallel instructionally effective schools in promoting excellence across an array of important outcomes other than achievement (Blust, Coldiron, & Lark, 1984), we suspect that this may be the case.

Improvement focus. Although these 12 districts were already among the most instructionally effective in the state, systematic improvement efforts were evident throughout the sample. To a large extent, this focus was

attributable to the press for accomplishment noted earlier and the goal-driven characteristics of these districts (discussed below). Decisions to undertake changes were not made casually, but once commitments were made, the resources and energy (both symbolic and material) needed to insure success were almost always provided. As with most important activities in these districts, improvement efforts were generally closely linked with district goals. As such, innovations and changes appeared to avoid the "clumping pattern" of new programs found in many districts and, consequently, were more successfully integrated into the school system.

Problem-solving focus. As in effective classrooms (Brophy & Good, 1986) and schools (Murphy & Hallinger, 1985), problems were viewed as issues to be solved or circumvented rather than as barriers to action. While the superintendents in these districts employed a wide range of styles in facing and resolving problems—including telling, building consensus, and pulling the organization along on their backs—none of them displayed the sense of hopelessness that characterizes many educational organizations when they face obstacles to improvement. Again, the litany of excuses to justify inaction was replaced with the perspective that problems at worst were surmountable and at best provided windows of opportunity for reaching important objectives.

Instrumental orientation. These IESD maintained a focus on improvement and change that differed in two ways from patterns followed by many school systems. First, they often adopted a longer term view of change than the yearly cycle we have seen in many districts. For example, staff development programs designed to train entire district staffs were generally planned over a period of years. Second, based upon our own work in other districts, we were surprised to see the extent to which quantitative data were used to supplement professional judgements. Much of the activity in these districts was driven by systematic analysis and application of data. Decisions made in the evaluation of principals, in the retention of students, and in the development of school objectives, for example, all relied heavily on the analysis of student test score data.

Internal focus. In general, a much greater amount of the superintendents' time and energies was devoted to consideration of internal district operations than the literature led us to expect. Although superintendents did perform a number of activities designed to maintain the stability of their organizations in their larger environments, their attention was primarily devoted to internal district operations. Superintendents relied more heavily upon formal community groups than upon informal community leaders to keep them informed. They did not seem to have well-developed informal networks that could be used to scan the community for information.

Characteristics of Curriculum and Instruction

Several of the technical characteristics of these IESD are noted below. Not surprisingly, a number of them closely parallel factors found in studies of instructionally effective schools. It is important, however, to note that the locus or impetus for these factors is found at the district level rather than at the individual school. This supports the proposition that districts can undertake more active roles than the facilitative and catalytic ones generally prescribed for them in the area of school improvement (Murphy, Hallinger, & Mesa, 1985).

Goal driven. In these IESD, goals were a major vehicle used to maintain excellence and promote improvement. School objectives and district goals were tightly coordinated. District goals drove the development of school objectives and these in turn became the key component in the evaluation of principals. New programs and commitments of resources were also made in response to district goals. Curricular and instructional goals were predominant in the overall goal structure. That is, approximately two thirds of the goals in these school systems focused on curricular and instructional issues.

Established instructional and curricular focus. There was a high degree of centrality to curriculum and instruction in these IESD as well as significant district-level coordination and control over school-level teaching systems. For example, 9 of the 12 districts had a preferred approach to instruction that they expected all teachers to emphasize. Eight had district-wide curriculum objectives that were expected to form the basis of classroom instruction. Eight districts employed single textbook adoptions while two others allowed schools to select from two or three books per subject. In all districts that used standardized tests, schools were required to use the district-selected instrument. Also, approximately 40% of the formal staff development activities for schools was established and controlled at the district level in these IESD.

Consistency and coordination of instructional activities. We have already noted a significant degree of coordination between district and school goals and the high level of district-directed consistency within and between schools in their approaches to instruction and expectations for student learning. Consistency and coordination were reinforced in numerous other ways in these districts. Two examples will help illustrate this point; the first deals with selection of personnel and the second with staff development. In five of the districts in the study, new principals were screened, tested, and hired primarily on the basis of their knowledge of curriculum and instruction generally. Candidates in two districts were given a written curriculum test. In three others they were tested on the districts' preferred method of instruction. New teachers in three districts

were “informally required” to receive district-developed inservice on the preferred instructional model before or shortly after assuming their new roles. In the area of staff development, district-developed activities focused primarily on helping staff learn and use the preferred teaching approach and curricular expectations. In addition, according to the superintendents, there was substantial consistency between goals in the areas of curriculum and instruction and budget priorities at the district level.

Strong instructional leadership from the superintendent. Superintendents in these districts played an active role in providing direct leadership in the areas of curriculum and instruction. How did they accomplish this? First, they were generally key actors in setting school system goals, in selecting district-wide staff development activities, in pressing for district-school goal coordination, and in supervising and evaluating principals. About two thirds of the superintendents were responsible for introducing preferred teaching strategies and/or consistency in curricular expectations. Eleven of them had an important part in inspecting the implementation of district curriculum and instructional strategies. They did this both by making numerous site-level visits and by conveying to district office and site-level administrators that a key part of their role was to carry out this inspection function as well. In addition, it appeared that many of the climate factors discussed earlier became systematized because of the beliefs, expectations, and practices of these chief executive officers. In other words, the superintendents were important actors in establishing and maintaining the organizational cultures evident in these IESD.

Monitoring of instructional and curricular focus. Not only did these districts and superintendents differ from other districts and superintendents in the extent to which they attended to curricular and instructional issues (Hannaway & Sproull, 1978–79; Pitner, 1982), they also devoted more time to monitoring technical core activities and inspecting outcomes (Peterson, 1983; 1984). Superintendents often monitored curriculum and instruction at the site level through the supervision and evaluation of principals—a role that ten of the twelve superintendents personally performed. As noted above, they often assessed the curricular and instructional expertise of principals during school visits and the implementation of district-directed curriculum and instruction during both school and classroom visits. In fact, the chief executive officers in these IESD reported spending approximately 10% of their work years personally monitoring activities at school sites. Other district office personnel also spent considerable amounts of time checking on the implementation of preferred teaching strategies and district curriculum objectives.

Outcomes were also closely inspected in these IESD. Student test scores were taken seriously. There was link-

age between these scores and personnel evaluations, especially of principals, curriculum planning, goal setting, and student retention. Progress on school-level goals was closely analyzed by the district office, especially by the superintendents. Other outcome indicators such as patterns of student attendance and rates of vandalism were frequently reviewed

Organizational Dynamics

One of the interesting aspects of these IESD was the extent to which there was a balance or “dynamic tension” between opposite organizational elements; for example, between district control and school autonomy. In order to provide a more complete picture of some of the complexity found in these districts and to temper any monolithic perspective of district control, we discuss four of the more significant of these “dynamic tensions” below.

Rationality without bureaucracy. It would be appropriate, at least in comparison with many other school systems (Deal & Celotti, 1977; Hannaway & Sproull, 1978–79), to regard these IESD as rational systems. There was clear purpose, a sense that the curriculum and instructional approaches emphasized could promote student learning, and patterns of outcome inspection and accountability—for example, there was an approximately 15% turnover in principals in these districts during the last five years because of inadequate job performance. At the same time we found little evidence of the bureaucratic rigidity that often accompanies rational systems (see Downs, 1967). An example will help illustrate this point. On a scale of *not much* (1) to *a great deal* (10), superintendents in these IESD rated district goal influence over school-site activities at 8.0. On the other hand, the amount of reports principals needed to complete for district office personnel was rated at 3.8 and the number that they actually completed was determined by district office rules and procedures, receiving a rating of 4.6. Although there was substantial evidence that the rational elements in these school systems were a product of district direction and coordination, the elements appeared to work because these systems were living, adaptive organisms rather than collections of codified procedures. Even when systems, rules, and procedures were used, they did not appear to have displaced the purpose for which they were established.

Structured district control with school autonomy. There was a substantial amount of district-level direction in these school systems. There was a high degree of district coordination and control over school-level activities, especially in those areas most often delegated (by default) to schools. Finally, there was a large amount of forced consistency between schools in these districts. In short, we found these IESD to be more

structured and controlled than we anticipated from our work in districts and reviews of the relevant literature (Hannaway & Sproull, 1978-79; Peterson, 1984; Weick, 1976). Yet the superintendents themselves often spoke of the autonomy and flexibility they granted to principals and schools. To a certain extent this can be explained because "autonomy" lies in the eye of the beholder. However, in a more real sense, these opposites exist in "dynamic tension" in these IESD. One way this tension played out was in the "funneled decision making" processes used in these school systems. Decisions in these districts tended to follow a pattern in which large openings for input and implementation narrowed considerably as decisions on goals and evaluations of outcomes were made. District influence was evident throughout. However, tight control was most noticeable at the narrowed parts of the funnel where decisions were made and outcomes were inspected. Greater autonomy for schools was evident in the input and implementation stages of the decision process.

Systems perspective with people orientation. It was evident that the achievement of district and school goals and the maintenance of organization systems were the major concerns of superintendents in these districts. Personnel goals of staff were not allowed to displace system goals. Administrator-teacher accommodations were not made at the expense of student learning. Yet within this framework of purpose and expectations, there was evidence that staff needs were recognized and attended to. Superintendents spent time in schools developing a sense of organizational identity among their staffs. During visits, they sometimes were able to attend to teachers' special requests. Superintendents spent considerable amounts of time in individual meetings with their principals—for example, seven of them met individually with their principals more than 25 times each year. Principals were more likely to be hired for their "people skills" in these IESD than for any factor other than curricular and instructional expertise. They were more likely to be terminated for lack of "people skills" than for any other single cause.

Strong leadership with an active administrative team. Strong leadership is not inconsistent with collaborative methods of operation (Murphy, Hallinger, Weil, & Mitman, 1983). Unfortunately, many educators assume that strong leadership augurs a return to the "dinosaur school of management." That this need not be the case was evident in these IESD. The superintendents in these districts were generally powerful chief executive officers. They did not shy away from making decisions or resolving problems. On the other hand, they consciously culled and used the expertise of their administrative staffs. They consistently mentioned their reliance on the collective knowledge and judgment of their administrative colleagues and each had specific methods for tapping into that expertise.

Variations on Themes

While it is impossible in this paper to treat the variations in these themes against all relevant background variables (district size, student SES, geographical setting, type of district, and so forth), it is important to point out that such between-group variations are evident in the data. In general, however, we found more similarities across these background variables in these IESD than we anticipated. In order to present a picture of these similarities and differences and to guard against overgeneralizations from the aggregated themes, we examine below two background variables (district size and type) within one ongoing activity (the supervision and evaluation of principals).

In 10 of the 12 districts, the superintendent was responsible for supervising and evaluating principals. In the two largest districts, with 19,400 and 13,300 students, respectively, this responsibility was delegated to the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. Both of these latter districts were also unified (K-12), a more complex organizational structure than that often found in elementary or high school districts. Thus, increasing the size of the district and the amount of differentiation appeared to reduce the direct participation of superintendents in the supervision and evaluation process (see Peterson, 1984b). There were differences in the number of school site visits made by superintendents by type but not by size of district. Superintendents of large districts reported visiting schools as often as did their counterparts in smaller districts. High school superintendents visited schools less frequently (92 total school site visits per year per superintendent) than either superintendents of elementary (144 visits) or unified (451 visits) districts. There were no clear differences among districts by size or type in the length or type (formal/informal) of visits by the superintendents. Except in the largest district, where the superintendent's visits did not have a supervisory purpose, superintendents across districts reported similar reasons for visiting schools. None of the superintendents used forms to collect or record information during their visits and all of them reported that they provided primarily oral feedback to principals following school visits.

Procedures used to evaluate principals were similar across all the districts. We believe that this can be attributed to spillover from state-mandated evaluation procedures for teachers. Superintendents in four of the five elementary districts reported that they formally included student test score data in principal evaluations. Only two of the four unified districts and none of the high school districts formally evaluated principals on the basis of student test score data. This may be because curriculum objectives are more clearly defined and easier to aggregate at the elementary level. It may also be that testing is more pervasive at the elementary level

and that the diverse curriculum structure at the secondary level is more difficult to assess. Finally, superintendents in elementary districts believed that district goals exerted more influence over principal/school activities than did superintendents in unified districts. This latter group in turn rated district goal influence over school-level activities higher than did superintendents in the other places.

Although it would be unwise to make too much of this example on the supervision and evaluation of principals, a number of points are worth noting. First, there is some evidence that the elementary districts are more tightly coupled than are the high school districts, a position developed by Firestone (1984) with reference to elementary and secondary schools. Second, unified districts act more like elementary than high school districts. Third, district size appears to be mediated through complexity of organizational structure. Finally, there are both many similarities and differences among the IESD in terms of size and type. This last finding can be extended to a number of other background variables.

Conclusions

Our goal was to describe some of the variables and factors that characterize a sample of IESD in California. It seems clear to us that the picture presented does not represent the majority of districts around the country. It shows that these districts are different from other school systems and that there are reasons why these districts are more instructionally effective than others. The attention to curriculum and instruction, the consistency of technical core factors, the strong instructional leadership role of the superintendents, the emphasis on inspection of processes and outcomes, and the high degree of coordination between district, school, and classroom set these districts apart from many of their counterparts. On this score we are optimistic and excited by the findings from the first round of our investigation.

On the other hand, much work needs to be done in this area. Twelve districts is a small sample and even with the discussion of the "dynamic tensions," the picture presented is too monolithic in nature. None of the districts possessed all the factors and characteristics. And even when districts shared similar factors, they did not do so in equal weights. In addition, limited space prevented any discussion of discrepant or negative cases or an analysis of organizational and environmental factors that could negate or prevent the development of IESD. Finally, in this vein it is important to note that recipes are as unlikely to be found for IESD as they are for instructionally effective schools (Edmonds, 1979; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986, 1987).

Many of the caveats and cautions contained in critiques of the school effectiveness literature also apply here (see Cuban, 1984; Purkey & Smith, 1983b; Mur-

phy, Hallinger & Mesa, 1985); for example, the reliance on student achievement as the only measure of instructional effectiveness, the correlational nature of the findings, and the lack of explanatory models. Nonetheless, given the state of the art in district research, we think this work provides a good first step to more complete investigations on the role of districts in promoting educational effects. Within a framework that examines such effects across the various layers of school systems—instructional group, classroom, school, and district—we believe that such research can contribute measurably to our understanding of instructional effectiveness.

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