

Building Policy From Practice: District Central Office Administrators' Roles and Capacity for Implementing Collaborative Education Policy

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This article defines district central office administrators' roles and capacity to support the implementation of school-community partnerships. Findings come from a strategic case study of central office administrators in Oakland, California (1990-2000). Using concepts from organizational learning theory for the theoretical framework, this study demonstrates that supporting collaboration departs significantly from central office administration-as-usual and highlights conditions and capital that enable central office administrators' new roles.

Keywords: *district central office; capacity; collaboration; policy implementation; organizational learning*

Partnerships between schools and community agencies present increasingly well-documented implementation challenges for school principals, teachers, and other school leaders. Challenges include managing complex relationships, overcoming turf disputes, reconciling different values and orientations between community and school, and financing new services (e.g., Cahill, 1993; Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1995; Crowson & Boyd, 1993; David and Lucile Packard Foundation, 1992; Rossman & Morley, 1995; Smylie, Crowson, Chou, & Levin, 1994; SRI International, 1996b). School district central offices and their staff—called central office adminis-

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trators here—have occasionally appeared in the background of school studies as avoiding or otherwise interfering with schools' efforts. These findings present central office administrators as consequential to implementation. However, this research teaches little about what central office administrators do when they aim to help schools with implementation. Other research on public administration and public policy suggests that central office administrators typically have experience with, training in, and institutional resources for monitoring schools' compliance with categorical (i.e., single-sector, top-down) policy but not for supporting implementation of cross-sector partnerships.

Recent shifts in education policy increase the urgency to fill this knowledge gap. In previous decades, school-community partnerships occasionally grew in neighborhoods across the country thanks largely to the initiative of local leaders and to funding from private foundations (e.g., Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1995; Clapp, 1939; Covello, 1958; Tyack, 1992). Now such partnerships appear as a frequent component or focus of education policy at federal, state, and local levels. For example, federal and state policies to strengthen instruction in reading, science, and bilingual education encourage, recommend, or require participation of families, health and human services agencies, youth organizations, and businesses, among others to help schools achieve ambitious academic standards (Honig & Jehl, 2000). Comprehensive school reform designs include community collaboration as a basic feature (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 1997, 1998). After-school initiatives ask schools to strengthen and connect students' in-school and out-of-school learning (California Department of Education, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1999). These policies create obvious new opportunities for schools but also place new demands on central office administrators who aim to help schools implement federal, state, and local policy. Arguably, when community partnerships appeared as a voluntary or occasional school reform strategy, central office administrators could more easily avoid participation. The incorporation of these partnerships into a significant number of education policies ups the ante on central office administrators' more productive participation.

The purpose of this article is to inform the implementation of policy that fosters school-community partnerships—what I call collaborative education policy—by defining roles and capacity for central office administrators who aim to help with implementation. This study addresses the following specific research questions:

- What are appropriate and productive roles for central office administrators in collaborative education policy implementation?
- What capacity enables central office administrators to take on those roles?

To answer the first question, I analyzed federal, state, and local education policy documents (e.g., legislation, regulations, program descriptions). This review shows that collaborative education policy as designed asks central office administrators to forge supportive rather than traditional regulatory or control relationships with school principals and other neighborhood leaders to advance the decisions and actual activities of school-community partnerships. In other words, collaborative education policy asks district central office administrators to allocate resources, to office procedures, and otherwise to build central office policy from the practice of school-community partnerships. I argue that traditional models of policy implementation and public administration typically do not illuminate what building policy from practice entails and actually focus on the opposite—mandating practice with policy. I draw on concepts from organizational learning theory, rarely applied to school district central offices or central office administrators, to define more specifically the features of these new central office roles.

To elaborate further on central office administrators' roles and to address the second question about capacity, I present findings from an embedded, comparative, qualitative case study of the implementation of four collaborative education policies in Oakland Unified School District between 1990 and 2000. In a departure from many previous studies of school-community partnerships that examine schools, this study focused on how district central office administrators participated in implementation. Oakland provided a strategic opportunity for this inquiry because it featured threshold conditions theoretically conducive to organizational learning. My analysis of the Oakland case demonstrates two main points: (a) Central office administrators' roles mirror basic activities outlined by organizational learning theory and (b) central office administrators' capacity for these new roles includes some conditions predicted by organizational learning theory and new forms of capital—particular knowledge, social/political ties, and administrative tools. I show that Oakland's central office administrators varied systematically in their capacity over time. In the concluding section, I discuss implications of this analysis for the theory and practice of educational administration, leadership, and policy implementation.

Importantly, this article focuses on what central office administrators do when they aim to enable school-community partnerships and what capacity these roles require—an implementation process I call building policy from practice. I do not identify specific policies that central office administrators should build from practice. As I argue below, which specific policies might enable implementation will vary depending on individual school-community partnerships' goals and strategies and will be riddled with ambiguity. This variable and situated nature of policy development heightens the importance

of identifying the process—central office administrators' roles and capacity for learning continually how to support the implementation of school-community partnerships. Such roles for central office administrators are a far cry from central office administration-as-usual. Accordingly, this study starts from the premise that an examination of central office administrators' roles and capacity in collaborative policy contexts in and of itself fills fundamental gaps in the research and practice of educational administration and policy.

BACKGROUND

Research on Central Office Administrators and Collaborative Education Policy

Studies of collaborative education policy largely have examined school-level implementation, including school principals' roles, not district central offices or central office administrators (e.g., Barfield et al., 1994; Cahill, 1993; Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1995; Cibulka, 1994; Crowson & Boyd, 1993; David and Lucile Packard Foundation, 1992; Jehl & Kirst, 1992; Levy & Shepardson, 1992; Mawhinney & Smrekar, 1996; Philliber Research Associates, 1994; Rossman & Morley, 1995; Smrekar, 1994; Smylie et al., 1994; SRI International, 1996a; Wehlage, Smith, & Lipman, 1992). This school focus in the research makes sense given that historically, district central offices (and state and federal governments for that matter) have not participated in the implementation of school-community partnerships. Prior to the early 1990s, private philanthropic foundations, not public agencies, supported most major efforts to promote school-community partnerships for school-age children and families (e.g., Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1995) and typically jumped over district central offices and focused directly on schools and neighborhoods and, sometimes, on state/county health and human services agencies.

District central offices occasionally appeared in these and other school studies as impediments to implementation because they imposed categorical mandates and policy frameworks that diverted resources from school-community partnerships (Cunningham & Mitchell, 1990; David and Lucile Packard Foundation, 1992; Mawhinney & Smrekar, 1996).¹ Such studies often concluded that central office administrators should form district-level collaborations based in part on the logic that if categorical district policies impeded implementation, perhaps cross-sector policies developed collaboratively with other agencies would enable implementation. Such "mirror-

image” reasoning—the assumption that the opposite of a constraining condition is an enabling condition—makes intuitive sense but rests on little if any direct empirical evidence about the relationship between central office collaborations and school-community partnerships (Majone, 1989; Nelson & Yates, 1978). Accordingly, past research highlights the importance of central office administrators’ participation to collaborative education policy implementation but offers few guides for the central office roles and capacity that such participation entails.

Collaborative Policy Demands on Central Office Administrators

To understand central office administrators’ roles and capacity for collaborative policy implementation, it is first important to investigate the demands these policies as designed place on district central offices and their administrators. Collaborative education policy designs typically call for at least three types of change: (a) Schools are to forge partnerships with community agencies such as health and human services organizations and Boys and Girls Clubs; (b) those school-community partnerships are to choose their own, shared goals and collaborative strategies for improving a range of student outcomes; and (c) central office administrators are to enable and support the implementation of sites’ local, collaborative decisions (Honig, 2002). For example, policy guidance on schoolwide programs, comprehensive school reform, and school-linked services initiatives in California, Kentucky, Missouri, and other states asks schools and community agencies to form collaboratives or school-community governance teams. These local decision makers are directed to study the status of youth and families through a needs assessment or community assessment process and to choose goals and strategies for their partnerships that they believe best address their local circumstances. These local choices are often presented in strategic planning documents submitted as part of applications for funding (e.g., California Department of Education, 1998; Family Investment Trust, 1995; Kentucky State Board for Elementary and Secondary Education, 1994). Policy designs either specify or imply that district central offices not dictate school-community partnerships’ goals and strategies but help partnerships select and implement their own goals and strategies (Foundation Consortium for School-linked Services, 2002; Honig, 2002).

Overall, collaborative education policy designs stem from a theory of action or set of underlying assumptions, shared with some site-based management programs and so-called bottom-up reform initiatives (Weiss, 1995; Honig, 2002). Namely, school principals, youth agency directors, and others

who work with students day-to-day have valuable and immediate information about students' needs and strengths that is important to good and relevant decisions about school improvement. Central office administrators typically lack this local knowledge and have limited if any jurisdictional authority to mandate goals and strategies for the community partners who dominate the membership rosters of many school-community partnerships. Central office administrators' knowledge and legal authority support a policy design that features school-community partnerships determining their own goals and strategies and central office administrators marshalling support for those decisions. Policy designs typically do not specify which supports central offices should provide but rather leave it to central office administrators to make those determinations in light of partnerships' chosen goals and strategies. Given available central office policy tools, such supports may range from changes in individual central office administrators' job descriptions and their actual day-to-day work to broader reforms of central office procedures and resource allocation. In other words, central office administrators' demands in collaborative education policy implementation relate to new processes for central office policy development: Central office administrators build central office policy from the practice of school-community partnerships. This analysis suggests that building policy from practice means central office administrators learn about partnerships' decisions and experiences and use that information to guide central office policy.

Limited Guides for Building Policy From Practice

Traditional models of implementation, bureaucracy, and policy making do not provide appropriate guides for what building policy from practice involves and actually focus on the opposite—how to mandate practice with policy. For example, implementation research and experience generally concern relationships in which central office administrators and other policy makers (also called principals or superiors) seek to direct the actions of schools (agents or subordinates) within their single-sector, hierarchical chain of command (e.g., Honig, 2001; Kreps, 1990; McDonnell & Elmore, 1987; Wildavsky, 1996). Local discretion appears as a problem to be harnessed through regulations, feedback, and other instruments of top-down control (Elmore, 1979-1980; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). Some say American state builders designed school district central offices and other public policy-making bureaucracies to reinforce centralized expertise at the expense of local knowledge and to limit outside influences on resource allocation and other public policy decisions (Skowronek, 1982). Studies of knowledge utilization by governmental agencies suggest that agency staff members tend to

use information to control, not to support, implementers' decisions (Weiss & Gruber, 1984). District central office administrators have a particularly weak track record as participants in public policy implementation in general and specifically in forging relationships with schools that foster schools' collaborative decisions (Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990; Spillane, 1996). Case studies of central office administrators operating as so-called school support providers typically feature central office administrators helping schools implement district central office decisions not schools' own decisions (e.g., Elmore & Burney, 1997).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Branches of organizational learning theory highlight specific activities involved when organizational actors such as district central office administrators collect information from outside their organization (i.e., information about partnerships' goals, strategies, and experiences) and use that information as the basis for organizational change (i.e., central office policy development). In this section, I identify and define these concepts, show how they help elaborate some aspects of central office administrators' roles and capacity, and explain how I used these concepts as the framework for an empirical investigation of central office administrators' participation in collaborative education policy implementation.

Organizational Learning Processes

Scholars from various disciplines including sociology, political science, and economics explain how organizations and individuals within organizations manage information to effect change and label the process "organizational learning." Whereas some theories of organizational learning draw heavily on theories of individual learning, scholars typically agree that certain activities are characteristic of organizational learning in particular.

First, organizational learning involves changes in individual activities and the activities or operating assumptions of collectives. Those collective changes are not simply the sum total of individual learning but a new set of preferences, capabilities, and worldviews (Leithwood & Louis, 1998; March & Olsen, 1989; Vaughn, 1996). Some refer to these changes as reform of "collective wisdom" (Argyris & Schon, 1996), "collective mind" (Wenger, 1998) or "organizational rules" (March, 1994a).²

Second, organizational learning involves two broad processes: the search for information outside the organization and the use or the incorporation of

that information (or the deliberate decision not to incorporate that information) into rules regarding the behavior of individual organization members and the organization as a collective. These concepts, *search* and *use*, have particular meanings and dimensions in organizational learning theory.

Search, also called exploration (Levitt & March, 1988) and knowledge acquisition (Huber, 1991), refers to a variety of processes by which information enters an organization. Information may be identified and brought into an organization by individual organizational members. For example, an organization may hire new staff members who carry new information with them. An organization may designate individuals, organizational subunits, and other so-called boundary spanners to venture outside an organization to gather information (Gladstein & Caldwell, 1985; Huber, 1991; Kanter, 1988). Information may also be sent into an organization as when state educational agencies provide guidelines for the use of new funds to school district central offices.

Various factors can stimulate search. For example, an organization's failure to reach its performance targets may prompt exploration for new ideas. Successful organizations, faced with an excess of resources that accumulate when they repeatedly exceed their targets, search for information for a number of purposes including to maintain their advantage (March, 1994a). Organizations may search for new information from subordinate organizations to reinforce or expand their control over those organizations (Weiss & Gruber, 1984). Organizational members may seek information for its own sake, to increase their repertoire of responses to future challenges or because search is part of their professional identities and purposes (Feldman, 1989).

Use³ refers to the incorporation of new information (or deliberate decisions not to incorporate new information) into an organization's collective wisdom, collective mind, or organizational rules. I consider these concepts, rarely applied to public policy settings, analogous to the development of organizational policy. Although terms vary, theorists generally agree that using information involves the following subprocesses:

Interpretation. Once information has been identified and brought into an organization, organizational members make sense of the information and decide whether and how to incorporate it into organizational policy (Weick, 1995). This sense-making process is essential because, typically, numerous policy responses or nonresponses may fit a given situation (Yanow, 1996).

Storage. Interpreted information is encoded as rules or "any semi-stable specification of the way in which an organization deals with its environment, functions, and prospers" (Levinthal & March, 1981, p. 307). Some refer to

this concept as the transferring of information into organizational memory (Argyris, 1976; Argyris & Schon, 1996; Cohen, 1991; Huber, 1991; Levitt & March, 1988). In policy contexts such as school district central offices, information may be viewed as stored when it becomes part of central office policy. Central office policies take various forms including administrative bulletins, school board decisions, resource allocations, and individual administrators' decisions about their own work (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977).

Retrieval. Organizational members draw on or retrieve the information, reformulated as organizational policy, to guide their subsequent choices and actions (Levitt & March, 1988).

Searching for and using information are not either-or propositions. Organizational learning involves search and use as well as its subactivities. Too much search could result in central office administrators' continual failure to use information they have already collected to inform policy, their inability to make decisions, or their inundation over time with more information than they can manage (Argyris, 1976; March, 1994a). An exclusive focus on using information already collected could result in central office administrators' developing policy based on outdated information and on their improved performance with a finite set of competencies not necessarily appropriate to implementation demands (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Importantly, search and use enable the other. Without search, central office administrators risk making decisions irrelevant to school-community partnerships; without use, central office administrators may fail to provide appropriate supports.

Organizational Learning Outcomes

Many scholars have observed that organizational learning may result in either first-order or second-order change (sometimes called single-loop or double-loop learning). First-order change refers to alterations in day-to-day organizational structures and procedures. Second-order changes alter the underlying premises, beliefs, values, and logics that guide day-to-day decisions (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Whereas scholars debate the value of these changes in different circumstances, they generally agree that organizational learning may result in one or both types of change. An organization also "can learn something in order not to change"—meaning that decisions not to alter policy also comprise learning (Cook & Yanow, 1996, p. 439); even inaction or reinforcement of the status quo can constitute a first-order or second-order change (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

However, scholars diverge when it comes to the relationship between organizational learning and improvement in ways that have important implications for this inquiry about central office administration. According to one view, organizational learning is a process of continuous inquiry that leads to demonstrable improvements in organizational performance (e.g., Fiol & Lyles, 1985). Theories of organizational learning as organizational improvement are those most often applied to school systems to distinguish productive, high-achieving school cultures (sometimes called “smart schools”) from ineffective schools (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1996; Leithwood, & Louis, 1998; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995; Marks & Printy, 2002). Scholars who ascribe to this view often highlight that individuals within learning organizations have common purposes and shared knowledge—that learning requires some level of collective agreement about whether and how to use information to improve performance (Leithwood, Aitken, & Jantzi, 2001; Louis, 1998). Perhaps because demonstrable improvements by objective measures are the sine qua non in high-stakes social policy arenas such as education, educational researchers tend to draw heavily on models of organizational learning as improvement.

A second view, seldom applied to schools or school district central offices, illuminates what building policy from practice entails. This view, generally advanced by decision-making theorists, posits that success in certain contexts is inherently ambiguous both because feedback on performance tends to lag behind practice and because any available feedback may be interpreted in multiple ways. Given such ambiguity, organizational actors aim to behave appropriately—in ways that legitimate authorities consider valuable—regardless of the objective results of their actions (Feldman, 1989; March, 1994a). In this view, organizational learning occurs when central office administrators search for and use information about the practice of school-community partnerships with the intention of enabling that practice—the behavior that collaborative education policy designs promote as appropriate—regardless of whether such actions actually improve the practice of school-community partnerships. Improvements may result, and these improvements may be attributed to the central office policy changes, but it is the process of search and use, not improved outcomes, that characterizes organizational learning (Argyris, 1976; Argyris & Schon, 1996).

This process view of learning seems particularly appropriate to central office administrators in this case. Implementation of school-community partnerships can take 3 to 5 years to produce gains in students’ school performance (Knapp, 1995; Rossman & Morley, 1995; SRI International, 1996a). Partnerships’ goals and strategies may change as school principals and other partnership leaders receive feedback about their work and as their

problems and populations evolve over time. Even if student outcomes appear to improve, the complexity of school-community partnerships makes it difficult to attribute such outcomes to the partnership or district central office policy (Knapp, 1995). Accordingly, measures of the central office policy development process (rather than the degree of partnerships' implementation or student outcomes) should guide the study of central office administration in collaborative policy contexts.

Models of organizational learning under ambiguous conditions also highlight that organizational learning for central office administrators involves managing risk. In classic economic terms, risk may be measured by the variance in the distribution of possible gains and losses associated with a particular choice. During search, central office administrators cast broad nets into their environments to fish for new information. Search thereby increases the amount of information central office administrators have to consider and widens the distribution of possible decisions and outcomes. Broader distributions mean greater risks of achieving extreme successes but also extreme failures. Conversely, when central office administrators use information they already have collected, they limit the range of alternatives under consideration and, accordingly, lessen their risk of extreme failures and successes (March, 1994b; March & Shapira, 1987).

Capacity for Organizational Learning

Education scholars have highlighted dimensions of schools' capacity for learning as continuous improvement (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1995; Leithwood, Leonard, & Sharratt, 1998; Leithwood & Louis, 1998; Marks, Louis, & Printy, 2000; Scribner, 1999; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999). However, this research teaches little about the capacity of public policy-making bureaucracies such as school district central offices to engage in learning under conditions of ambiguity. Conditions often present when private firms engage in organizational learning may be relevant to district central offices and include the following:

Warrant for change. Organizational members typically will not engage in search unless they have incentives or experience stimuli to look beyond their own organizational boundaries (Leithwood et al., 1995; March, 1994b). Stimuli may range from personal inclinations toward risk taking to broad organizational crises related to organizational survival.

Past experiences. Past experiences increase an organization's internal receptivity to new information and help explain whether and how organiza-

tional members recognize information as important, bring information into the organization, and use information as the basis for policy development (W. M. Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Kimberly, 1981). Organizational members use past experiences to help make sense of new information (Weick, 1995). Additionally, individuals who have searched before without negative consequences may experience search as less risky and search more readily than others even though by definition search increases risk (March, 1994a).

Intentionality. Learning occurs not by accident but because organizational members set out to learn through purposeful, structured, and directed exchanges between their organizations and their environments over time (Kanter, 1988; Lave, 1993; Wenger, 1998).

Opportunities for organizational-environmental interaction. Organizational learning requires specific occasions for organizational-environmental interactions (including interactions with other organizations in their environments such as school-community partnerships) (Lave, 1993; Wenger, 1998). Through such interactions, organizational members access new information and negotiate its meaning socially rather than individually.

Designation of boundary spanners. The designation of individual members or organizational units to specialize in search can be important to organizational learning (Gladstein & Caldwell, 1985; Kanter, 1988). Individuals have different experiences and preferences when it comes to managing risk. Likewise, certain positions within an organization may be relatively more conducive to search. For example, individuals in research and development divisions, field offices, and other subunits on the periphery of private sector organizations have been observed to have more opportunities to search than those deeper within organizations. Those closer to the organizational core may be ill-suited to search but skilled at incorporating information into new organizational rules and routines (March & Olsen, 1975; Scott, 1995).

Organizational Learning as Conceptual Framework

In sum, organizational learning theory provides several important conceptual guides for this inquiry. First, it clarifies that collaborative education policy demands that central office administrators search for and use information about the practice of school-community partnerships continuously and under inherently ambiguous conditions. Search, use, and their subactivities provide a set of concepts to focus direct empirical study specifically to uncover instances of those activities in practice. Because of the ambiguity inherent in

the enterprise, these activities themselves comprise appropriate measures of organizational learning. Second, organizational learning theory directs attention to three equally important and interrelated units of analysis: individual administrators who search for and use information, district central office organizations into which that information may or may not be incorporated as policy, and interactions between central offices and school-community partnerships where the transfer of information may occur. Third, organizational learning theory raises specific questions about central office administrators' management of risk, including whether boundary spanners help with the risk-taking activities fundamental to search. Fourth, organizational learning theory highlights conditions potentially conducive to organizational learning that provide criteria for selecting a strategic research site—a place where organizational learning may be possible—as elaborated below.

METHOD

Research Design

I used a qualitative case study design because such designs uncover how events unfold in real-life contexts and provide opportunities to describe and analyze little-understood phenomena such as central office administrators' roles and capacity for collaborative policy implementation over time (Yin, 1989). As elaborated below, I focused on the implementation of four collaborative education policies in a single school district. I drew primarily on direct, sustained observations of central office administrators, directors of school-community partnerships, and others integrally involved in implementation (Barley, 1990). Focusing intensively on four policies within a single context (an embedded, comparative case) allowed me to compare central office administrators' participation across and between policies. Multiple cases within a single district increased the number of opportunities for observation while holding various contextual factors constant, and otherwise strengthened the power of this case study.

Site Selection

Oakland, a midsized, urban California school district, provided a strategic research site. Strategic sites “exhibit the phenomena to be explained or interpreted to such an advantage and in such accessible form that . . . [they enable] the fruitful investigation of previously stubborn problems and the discovery of new problems for further inquiry” (Merton, 1987, pp. 1-2). Although not

generalizable to practice, findings from strategic sites may generate hypotheses and theoretical ideas that other districts can use to guide practice and reveal patterns with such little deviation that they could reasonably represent populations (Hartley, 1994; Merton, 1987; Phillips & Burbules, 2000). Among Oakland's specific advantages in the 1990s, Oakland was implementing at least four collaborative education policies, each of which challenged district central office administrators to build policy from practice. Table 1 describes Healthy Start, the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth, the Village Center Initiative, and the Oakland Child Health and Safety Initiative.

In addition, my early inquiries revealed that Oakland's leaders aimed to facilitate implementation by strengthening connections between the central office and school-community partnerships. I also found that specific conditions in Oakland were theoretically conducive to organizational learning. These conditions included a warrant for change, past experiences, intentionality, opportunities for interaction, and the designation of boundary spanners. Because this study aimed in part to uncover whether these conditions also proved important to building policy from practice, I elaborate on these conditions in the section on findings.

Data Collection

I collected data between 1998 and 2000 but I examined events between 1990 and 2000. This longitudinal view enabled me to consider Oakland's early experiences potentially relevant to implementation of the four focal policies, even though those experiences predated the actual launch of the policies and the start of my data collection (Cznariawska, 1997).

Per organizational learning theory, I chose three interrelated units of analysis: individual central office administrators, the district central office as an organization, and the relationship between the district central office and school-community partnerships.

Sustained observations of meetings between central office administrators and site directors were primary data sources (Barley, 1990). Meetings included regular school board and city council sessions, meetings of the mayor's education commission, and regular, formal gatherings of central office administrators and partnership representatives convened to help with implementation of the four focal policies—what I have called “intermediary meetings” elsewhere (Honig, 2000). I sampled school board, city council, and commission meetings whose agendas seemed most relevant to the four focal policies. Because the intermediary meetings focused on collaborative policy implementation, I attended almost all intermediary meetings between

1998 and 2000. In all, I directly observed approximately 160 meeting hours. I recorded meeting conversations almost verbatim and I collected official minutes from meetings that predated my data collection.

To capture central office administrators' participation beyond these formal meetings and to address potential problems with construct validity, I triangulated data from observations with semistructured interviews and record data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 1989). To develop my interview sample, I started with those central office administrators who participated most often in the meetings identified above. These individuals tended to occupy positions on the periphery or frontlines of the central office dedicated to regular, direct contact with school-community partnerships (i.e., search) and had professional titles such as Director of Village Centers, Healthy Start Director, and Director of Student Services. I call them "frontline central office administrators" to highlight their distinct central office positions. I used a snowball sampling technique (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to select central office administrators who did not participate directly in the meetings with school-community partnerships but whom the frontline central office administrators identified as essential to central office policy development (i.e., use). These administrators had titles such as Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent. I call them "senior central office administrators" to reflect their broader authority within the central office.

I interviewed school-community partnership leaders who frequently attended the regular meetings with central office administrators. Because respondents called the partnerships sites, I use the terms *sites* and *site directors* in my reports of findings. Site directors were school principals, heads of community-based organizations, and other individuals in site leadership roles. I also interviewed directors of nonprofit organizations who convened the central office-site meetings and otherwise participated in implementation. Because they had authority to design central office policy, I interviewed school board members. I chose those members whom central office administrators identified as knowledgeable about the four focal policies. I also interviewed city and county government representatives who reportedly aimed to help with implementation.

To tap into organizational learning constructs, my interviews with central office administrators focused on their interactions with sites and, within these interactions, on instances of search, use, and the subactivities identified above. These interviews also investigated central office administrators' beliefs about their work (including their intentions to build policy from practice), their background (various accumulated experiences), and their sense of their own capacity to support site implementation. Interviews with site directors explored their experiences with implementation and the nature of their

TABLE 1
Oakland's Collaborative Education Policies

	<i>Year^a</i>	<i>Policy as Designed</i>	<i>Oakland's Participation</i>	
			<i>Implementation Plans</i>	<i>Scope^b</i>
Healthy Start	1992	Originating agency: California Department of Education School-community partnerships: assess community needs/strengths; develop local education goals; devise strategies to reorganize, coordinate, and strengthen school/community programs to achieve local goals.	Partnerships apply directly to state. Proposals range. For instance, some involve the provision of new health, mental health, and other formal services at or near schools; others focus on improving curriculum and instruction during and after school.	1,244 schools statewide (~20% of California's public schools) 16 Oakland schools (18% of Oakland's public schools) Up to \$400,000/site over 3 years
Oakland Fund for Children and Youth	1996	Originating agency: City of Oakland Applicants develop local goals related to youth development and education and devise strategies for reorganizing, coordinating, and strengthening existing school and community programs to achieve goals.	Applicants submit proposals annually to a city-appointed citizen advisory panel. Applicants range from individual youth enrichment programs to school-community partnerships that aim to improve curriculum and instruction during and after school.	Twenty-four schools citywide (26% of Oakland's public schools) ^c ~\$5.7 million/year for each of 12 years
Village Center Initiative	1998	Originating agency: DeWitt Wallace—Readers Digest Fund Five cities received multiyear grants each exceeding \$1 million based on applications to transform schools into community learning centers and otherwise strengthen students' opportunities to learn in and out of school.	Partnerships apply to citywide, interagency collaborative. Examples of proposals: (a) Create after-school program for youth and adults emphasizing youth leadership and community organizing; connect in- and out-of-school curriculum and instruction. (b) Build a network among 10 schools to	5 cities nationwide 15 centers (proposed) including all Oakland middle schools ~\$1 million over 3 years

(continued)

TABLE 1 (continued)

	Year ^a	Policy as Designed	Oakland's Participation	
			Implementation Plans	Scope ^b
Oakland Child Health and Safety Initiative	1998	Originating agency: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Five cities received multimillion dollar, multiyear grants based on their proposals to effect citywide changes in public bureaucracies to improve decision making, collaboration, service delivery, and children's health and safety.	strengthen in-school and after-school programs for low-performing students. Oakland's implementation plan framed education, health, and safety as interrelated outcomes and proposed to build Village Centers citywide as a primary strategy for improving these outcomes. (See Village Center Initiative above.)	Five cities nationwide Oakland Village Centers \$1.2 million citywide/year for each of 5 years

a. Dates indicate the years Oakland received its first operational grants for implementation.

b. Schools: Counts indicate the number of schools named in funded operational grants between 1990 and 2000 except where noted. This figure does not include planning grant recipients or schools that may participate in implementation but not appear in a formal grant application. Accordingly, the number of schools listed here likely underestimates the total number of participating schools. Likewise, these school counts also underestimate the number of school children who may benefit from these policies not through schools but through participating community agencies. For example, the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth may support a community-based, youth leadership program that has no formal school connection but that has helped improve students' performance in school. A measure of student participation and impact would likely yield broader measures of policy scope than the figures here.

Funding: Note that these dollar amounts indicate the approximate amount of new funding available through each grant initiative. Because these grant programs require the redirection or investment of other resources, the total dollar amount listed here underestimates the total funding used for implementation. For example, one Oakland Village Center had an annual operating budget that exceeded \$1 million from various sources.

c. Measures of school involvement in the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth were only available for 2001-2002. Staff members estimate that these figures have remained fairly consistent since 1997. These counts indicate programs provided on a school site not other school linkages (e.g., recruiting from schools, collaborations with schools not involving the provision of programs in a school facility) and therefore comprise conservative estimates.

TABLE 2
Distribution of Interviews

<i>Affiliation</i>	<i>Number of Respondents</i>	<i>Number of Interviews</i>
Central office	9	13
Site	8	11
School board	3	3
City/city council	8	10
County	1	1
Nonprofit	4	4
Totals	33	42

interactions with the central office. In all, I conducted 42 interviews with 33 individual respondents, 17 of whom were from either sites or the central office. Each interview lasted between 60 and 150 minutes. All interviews were audiotaped and most were transcribed. See Table 2 for the distribution of interviews.

I supplemented the observations and interviews with reviews of record data. Records included official minutes from the meetings that predated the start of my data collection and various implementation reports. These documents provided particularly important evidence of central office policy development over the course of the 1990s.

Data Analysis

I used NUD*IST software to code the interview and observation transcripts and electronic record data. I distinguished all data by policy initiative to facilitate comparisons among initiatives. I derived the findings reported here through three phases of coding. First, I used codes related to organizational learning theory that required little interpretation, including central office-site interactions, learning (instances when respondents indicated or observations suggested central office administrators had searched for and used information about sites' practice to inform policy development), central office participation (instances when central office administrators played a role in various activities), implementation challenges, and implementation supports. From the data coded as interactions, learning, and participation, I coded instances of search, use, and their subactivities as well as "other"—activities that appeared as something other than learning. The latter data generally included instances when central office administrators ignored information about sites' practice or did not seek it out or use it in any observable or reported ways. I compared data in the "other" category with the instances of

search, use, and their subactivities to confirm that the activities within each category were obviously distinguishable.

Second, I coded evidence of factors that constrained or enabled learning using codes corresponding with the conditions theoretically conducive to organizational learning cited above. I found evidence of these conditions across all four initiatives but also a sizable data set that did not fit these categories. I mined this subset for patterns and developed new codes inductively and through constant comparison (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990): central office's preemptive policy action, site readiness, knowledge of sites and systems, site and systems ties, and administrative tools. Because the latter three categories referred to resources on which central office administrators actively drew during search and use, I distinguished these resources as capital.

Third, I looked for variations in capacity. I found evidence of the three forms of capital across implementation of all four policies but to different degrees: the policies with the heaviest involvement by frontline central office administrators differed from the policies with stronger participation by senior central office administrators. Because these participation differences seemed to account for the variations in capital—an explanation supported by organizational learning theory—I report on such variations by administrators' participation. I shared this approach with key respondents who suggested I highlight midlevel administrators (Miles & Huberman, 1994); however, my data set included too few examples of midlevel administrators' participation to report separately.

FINDINGS

As indicated earlier, this study asks what are central office administrators' roles and capacity for collaborative education policy implementation. The following section draws on empirical data from the Oakland case to demonstrate that central office roles are consistent with organizational learning. I then discuss the capacity that enabled central office administrators to take on these roles.

Organizational Learning in Action

Various respondents indicated in interviews and observations that implementation involved learning. Their specific comments mirror the concepts from organizational learning theory highlighted above.

- Central office administrator: We become servants to the neighborhoods.
- School board member: I guess what I am trying to resist is the notion that there needs to be one model and that the [school] board needs to impose it. I mean that is why I really like the idea of school-by-school assessment and then working together between the district and the city and county to meet the needs at each school site.
- Director of a citywide nonprofit organization: [Implementation for the central office means] being very clear about what the best practices are and being willing to be a learning organization like being willing to reevaluate how you do what you do on a regular basis. . . . That's an evolving process.
- Leader of a community-based nonprofit organization: It's about [the central office] providing technical assistance immediately and capturing that information on what people [sites] are needing and sorting it to translate to broader policy.

Over the course of the 1990s, central office administrators frequently demonstrated specific organizational learning concepts in practice. I found critical incidents of learning in combinations of policy documents, observation notes, and interview transcripts over time and across all four policies, making discrete, brief display of data challenging. The following example of site implementation in one Oakland neighborhood, presented in narrative form, captures how central office administrators used information about sites' practice to build policy as contrasted with traditional modes of information sharing in public policy settings such as advocacy campaigns and public hearings. This example is also typical in terms of its content. Although Oakland had almost 10 years of experience with collaborative education policy implementation, most sites were still in their infancy. Early implementation concerns, in Oakland as elsewhere, tended to involve concrete, practical challenges of launching sites including securing facilities, turning the water on, hiring staff members, designing programs, establishing relationships, and as in this example, ensuring the safety of youth and adults on school campuses when campuses opened their doors to community residents and other non-school staff members on a regular basis (SRI International, 1996b).

Early in the implementation of the Village Center Initiative, the school principals, directors of community-based organizations, and parents at a school-community site in one Oakland neighborhood had grown increasingly concerned that unsafe conditions at and near the two participating schools jeopardized not only students' well-being and their school performance but the viability of the school-community partnership itself. Multiple conflicts had erupted among students after school including one that resulted in a student's being knocked unconscious. Service providers were reluctant to visit the school campuses. The school principals appeared apprehensive about opening their school doors to various community members.

Interviews, document reviews, and observations revealed that safety problems were not new to this neighborhood. For several years, neighborhood leaders had tried to direct the attention of Oakland Unified School District and the City Manager's Office to neighborhood safety concerns through traditional avenues. For example, Community Organization,⁴ a long-standing advocacy group, had organized campaigns and rallies to make information about neighborhood concerns available to central office administrators, police, and other government officials. Community Organization's leaders and community residents also gave reports during periods for public testimony at school board and city council meetings. These traditional avenues—advocacy campaigns and public hearings—had not led to changes in school district or city policy or to improved neighborhood safety by other means. Community Organization's assistant director indicated that through these traditional avenues, he just could not “get the district's [central office administrators' and the school board's] attention.” He recalled, “We [were] at a stage where the community [was] poised to make a change but resources [were] not being put to where they [were] needed to help the community take the next step.”

The assistant director and others pointed to their participation in the Village Center Initiative as a turning point in their efforts to establish relationships with what they called “government,” “the system,” “the district,” and “policy makers,” not only when it came to safety but also regarding their broader student achievement and community development goals. As part of the Village Center Initiative, a citywide nonprofit organization convened regular meetings of central office administrators, site directors, and others specifically, in the words of the nonprofit's director, “to connect government resources with community concerns.” In early 1999, Community Organization's directors presented their safety challenges at one of these meetings. Accustomed to traditional advocacy relationships, the Community Organization directors at first demanded a complete overhaul of the school campus and city policing systems. Over a 6-week period, central office administrators, site directors, and others reviewed the neighborhood community safety report from which Community Organization directors had derived their initial policy recommendations. Subsequently, central office administrators, city staff members, and site directors agreed not to pursue large-scale police reform. Instead, they identified fights in a two-block radius around a specific street intersection as a place to start. Because most fights seemed to occur at this particular intersection, a reduction in the number of fights there potentially would lead to demonstrable improvements in neighborhood safety. Community Organization's assistant director committed to increase the presence of parents in and around the schools during and after school. District

central office administrators and representatives of the City Manager's Office pursued changes in city and central office policy. Several respondents involved in these events indicated that they knew they had special opportunities at that particular time to pursue such policy changes because, concurrently, the city manager and interim superintendent were in the process of reorganizing the school district's safety system. With the help of a citywide nonprofit director, central office administrators and city officials examined using the Village Center neighborhoods as "test cases" for the broader reorganization. To facilitate planning, the nonprofit director convened a series of meetings between the chief of police, central office administrators, and site directors.

Several aspects of this extended example illustrate organizational learning in action. First, central office administrators' participation in meetings and informal conversations illustrates search in action—regular interactions to collect information about sites' practice. Central office administrators also worked with site directors and others to translate that information into various policy responses and strategic nonresponses. Unlike traditional advocacy relationships whereby parties outside government typically present not their practice but specific policy recommendations, these meetings provided extended forums for examining and interpreting experience.

Information about the safety concerns and the proposed and pursuant policy changes were stored in a variety of forms. For example, the community safety report became a part of Oakland Unified School District's policy manual in progress for the Village Center Initiative. City officials and senior central office administrators indicated that the reorganization of school police, in conjunction with the neighborhood-based parent involvement effort, were viable strategies to address the safety concerns. Accordingly, the reorganization may be viewed as part of an effort to encode sites' experiences into policy. As evidence of ongoing search and use, the Community Organization directors and other site representatives used their weekly meetings with central office administrators, nonprofit directors, and others to revisit their implementation concerns. The interim superintendent agreed to use safety in Community Organization's neighborhood as one measure of the effectiveness of the broader policy changes.

Capacity for Building Policy From Practice

Particular capacity proved consequential to whether central office administrators adopted these new roles. I found that capacity in this context had two distinct dimensions: threshold conditions and capital. Threshold conditions were factors that appeared necessary but not sufficient for building policy

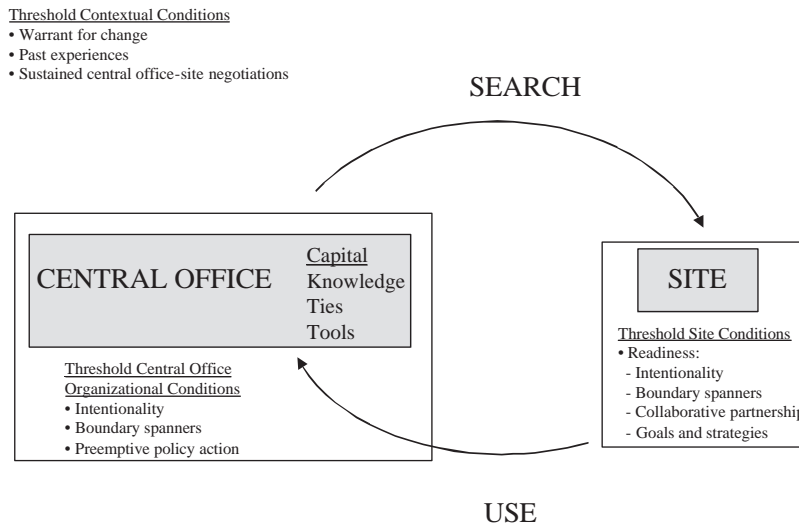


Figure 1. Central Office Administrators' Capacity for Building Policy From Practice

from practice; many of these conditions were met in the early to mid-1990s when Community Organization's leaders also sought remedies to their safety concerns and when collaborative policy implementation proceeded with little evidence that central office administrators took on the roles described above. By contrast, the resources I identify as capital were those on which central office administrators relied as they sought to build policy from practice.

In this section, I present these dimensions of capacity. I summarize these dimensions in Figure 1. Several of the threshold conditions corroborate organizational learning theory that suggests learning requires a warrant for change, past experiences, intentionality, sustained central office-site interactions, and the designation of boundary spanners. My findings extend organizational learning theory in three ways. First, I discovered additional conditions important to organizational learning: central office administrators' preemptive policy actions and site readiness. Second, organizational learning theory does not differentiate among these conditions, but I found conditions varied depending on the extent to which it fell within central office administrators' influence or control. Third, I found dimensions of capacity not anticipated by organizational learning theory that I call capital: site and systems knowledge, ties to sites and systems, and administrative tools for site-by-site support.

Threshold Contextual Conditions

Warrant for change. Throughout the 1990s, Oakland faced what had become familiar urban conditions including substandard school performance and resources (e.g., Coburn & Riley, 2000; Commission for Positive Change in the Oakland Public Schools, 1990; Gammon, 2000). During that decade, Oakland Unified School District grappled with at least three formal threats of state takeover of the district due to alleged mismanagement of public funds and students' poor performance (Honig, 2001). Central office administrators invariably indicated that the central office operated with a high degree of urgency for reform and improvement.

Past experiences. Central office administrators typically referred to Oakland's relatively long history of efforts to close gaps between government and citizens, activist politicians, and experiments with community control as a source of guidance and inspiration for collaborative education policy implementation (McCorry, 1978). By the late 1990s, central office administrators and others reported that they had accumulated enough experience with school-community partnerships in particular that they were poised to expand and deepen implementation. As evidence, these respondents pointed to a report of Oakland's lessons learned about collaboration after 10 years of implementation and to publications about Oakland site development that the state department of education featured as models of best practices in school-community collaboration (Oakland School Linked Services Work Group, 1999; Urban Strategies Council, 1992, 1993).

Sustained interactions between central office administrators and sites over time. Central office administrators highlighted at least three formal opportunities for regular interactions with sites. Site-level partnerships governed site operations and typically included school principals, parents, students, directors and staff members of youth organizations, health and human services providers, and, occasionally, central office administrators. Four intermediary organizations—new organizations generally composed of frontline and senior central office administrators and site leaders (or their representatives)—were established specifically to help with implementation of each policy initiative and provided regular (weekly or monthly) opportunities for interactions (Honig, 2000). Central office administrators and site directors both pointed to city council and school board meetings as opportunities to connect with the superintendent and elected officials for policy decisions requiring high levels of authority. Central office administrators agreed to participate in such interactions, which suggests that they might be categorized as

a central office organizational condition. However, given that sites, nonprofit organizations, and others essentially made each opportunity available, I classify them as a contextual condition.

Threshold Central Office Organizational Conditions

Intentionality. An analysis of policy documents and interview and observation notes revealed that Oakland leaders believed that implementation involved new learning relationships between the central office and sites. In addition to the quotations noted above, by the mid- to late 1990s, senior administrators (primarily interim and assistant superintendents) reported school-community partnerships among their top three priorities for Oakland public schools. The interim superintendent promoted reinventing government reforms that had at their core the retraining of central office administrators specifically to support schools' collaborative decision making (Barzelay, 1992; City of Oakland, 2000). Jerry Brown ran for and won the post of mayor on a platform that included Village Centers and new forms of citizen-responsive and citizen-accountable government (Brown, 1998; City of Oakland Office of the Mayor, 1999). As partial evidence of central office administrators' intentionality, by the end of the 1990s, at least half of Oakland's 91 public schools received funding to participate in one of these four collaborative policy initiatives.⁵

Designation of boundary spanners. Oakland Unified School District designated a group of frontline central office administrators specifically to serve as liaisons with sites and to bring site information back to the district central office (i.e., to search). The individuals hired into these positions seemed particularly well suited to their "boundary spanning" roles. All reported that they enjoyed the daily unpredictability of their roles and that they believed that the highest rewards came from taking the greatest risks. Many of these individuals indicated that they had spent many years as community organizers and that they had direct experience leading school-community sites. They described themselves as the "movers and the shakers" of the district who worked "out of the box" where they believed "real change happened." These frontline central office administrators tended to work in offices on the periphery of the central office—literally outside but close to the main central office building. As one frontline central office administrator pointed out,

We are far enough away here [in a building across the street from the main central office headquarters] that parents and community members will come here. They tell me they won't go across the street. But we aren't so far away that we

aren't a part of what's going on over there [across the street]. I'm over there five, six times a day at least.

Preemptive policy action. Central office administrators jump-started implementation when they identified and addressed in advance certain predictable, technocratic site implementation challenges that only they had the authority to remedy. Interviews and observations confirmed that when central office administrators did not take such preemptive policy actions these issues often overwhelmed their interactions with sites and otherwise diverted time and resources from the mostly unpredictable challenges that ultimately arose. For example, all four collaborative policy strategies potentially involved community organizations using school buildings after regular school hours, which required costly building permits and other agreements regarding facilities. Early in implementation, a citywide nonprofit organization convened central office administrators (specifically, business managers) and one pioneering site to discuss potential facilities concerns. Many central office administrators and site directors attributed early implementation successes at that pioneering site to preemptive actions taken as a result of these meetings. One central office administrator highlighted that such preemptive actions helped avoid “reinventing the wheel”—negotiating individually for resources that all sites needed. By contrast, later in implementation when the meetings were discontinued, central office administrators primarily addressed issues that sites brought to their attention. This passive stance led to extensive site-central office negotiations over issues that knowledgeable observers could have identified and addressed in advance.

Threshold Site Conditions

Site readiness. Organizational learning by definition involves interactions between organizations and their environments. In collaborative policy contexts, sites comprised the central offices' essential environment. Not surprisingly then, site conditions proved fundamental to learning. Because these conditions were not a focus for study, I use the general term *site readiness* to refer to what may be a broader set of relevant site-specific conditions.

Site-specific conditions captured in this examination of the district central office included sites' intentionality and designation of boundary spanners. Organizational learning theory predicted these conditions on the part of the focal learning organization (the central office). I found that such conditions with regard to sites—the focal organization's environment—also were important to organizational learning by the central office. Specifically, because par-

ticipation in collaborative education policy was voluntary for sites, the fact that approximately one third of Oakland's schools received funding for collaborative policy implementation indicates in part sites' intentions to participate. Comments by site directors in meetings and interviews verified their expectations that their participation in the policy initiatives would result in new supportive relationships with the district central office. Sites' designation of boundary spanners meant that individual site directors were available to interact with central office administrators.

I discovered two additional site-specific conditions that also seemed important to organizational learning by the district central office: the formation of site partnerships and partnerships' development of goals and strategies. In other words, building policy from practice requires site practice from which to build policy. Several central office administrators observed that their conversations with sites stalled when site leaders did not clearly represent a broad site-based constituency and when they could not articulate partnership goals and strategies (Oakland School Linked Services Work Group, 1999). One central office administrator indicated,

In the early years [early 1990s] we thought it was important for sites to have need [large populations of low-income students]. We were wrong. Need is important. But sites need to be ready. They have to do the . . . community assessments. They have to do that relationship building. We were wrong to think that need was enough and that we could do it for them. No one can come in and do that for them. It's fundamental.

Central Office Administrators' Collaborative Capital

Many of these threshold conditions were met in the early 1990s but central office administrators and other respondents reported remembering no examples of building policy from practice during that period. They recalled central office-site interactions but that these interactions did not resemble building policy from practice. Central office administrators specified that they intended to build policy from practice in the early 1990s but that they lacked necessary resources for action. By contrast, an analysis of events at the end of the 1990s revealed instances of search and use and specific resources that office administrators reported as important to their taking on those roles. Policy documents and observational data confirmed three largely nontraditional forms of capital as fundamental: site and systems knowledge, political/social ties to sites and policy systems, and particular administrative tools. This section describes these resources.

Knowledge about sites and policy systems. Consistent with organizational learning theory, the Oakland case revealed that building policy from practice requires information—in this case, knowledge about sites and policy systems.

One central office administrator captured the overall importance of site knowledge when he commented, “[Without site knowledge] then it’s bureaucrats . . . sustaining their employment. It’s [administrators saying] what they think for whatever reason—some maybe good reasons some maybe not—that people [sites] need.” In other words, central office administrators frequently made a variety of policy decisions related to collaborative education policy implementation. Whether or not those decisions stemmed from sites’ practice appeared associated with central office administrators’ knowledge of that practice.

More specifically, site knowledge provided evidence that frontline central office administrators described as essential to their advocacy for central office policy changes. After all, frontline administrators’ peripheral position provided some flexibility for search beyond the central office, but these positions also conferred limited authority to effect policy changes within the central office. These central office administrators reported and demonstrated in their day-to-day activities that securing policy changes often required that they lobby senior central office administrators and elected officials for assistance and that detailed site knowledge helped them to lobby more effectively. Many frontline central office administrators learned this lesson from critical instances when they lacked site knowledge. As one long-time central office administrator recalled,

All we had to do was a little basic arithmetic. . . . Is the county willing [to provide additional site resources]? Not unless we could really prove . . . that it was to their benefit. . . . I don’t think that kind of basic work [documentation of site experiences, needs, and accomplishments] was ever really accomplished to prove the case.

Site knowledge also helped central office administrators and others understand in concrete terms what specific central office policy changes might advance site implementation. This concrete understanding proved particularly important because collaborative education policy documents tended to articulate abstract goals about learning and community responsiveness that some central office administrators found difficult to translate into actual central office policies. As one nonprofit leader observed about her experience with three of the four collaborative policy initiatives,

Like, if we know we want the district [central office] to be more community-friendly we can work through that together with the district and we can move the district on being more open to community involvement and other broad themes of the initiative. . . . Being able to work through those negotiation issues on a small level around four [sites] is doable. You know, forcing the district to have to be more community friendly in general—I mean, how would you do that?

Central office administrators also spoke about the importance of systems knowledge—knowledge about the rules and procedures of the district central office and other governmental agencies—to their ability to use or to help other central office administrators to use site knowledge to develop central office policies. As one central office administrator observed,

The individual [administrator] whoever oversees this really needs to be hooked into someone . . . that has a firm understanding of how our district [central office] operates. Sometimes the mere fact that because an assistant superintendent's calling helps [to leverage policy changes]. But most times it's because they've been around and they know what is happening, what is not happening, or why something might not be working [that makes them helpful].

When central office administrators claimed or demonstrated a lack of systems knowledge, they tended to ignore or fail to act on site knowledge. For example, Oakland's sites almost invariably involved non-school personnel (e.g., health and human service providers, parents) working on school campuses. Site directors typically knew that the district central office required background screenings for any adults working with youth at schools but questioned whether their status as a "Village Center" or "Healthy Start School" might qualify them for exemptions from these costly requirements and potentially embarrassing inquiries into the personal lives of community members with whom they were trying to establish partnerships. Site directors raised these issues with frontline central office administrators who, unbeknownst to sites, were unfamiliar with the district policies and unaware that requirements stemmed from unambiguous state and federal laws. Even if the district pursued waivers from state and federal agencies, sites would still face the regular requirements in the meantime. Frontline central office administrators responded to sites' questions by claiming they were knowledgeable: They suggested that the rules were unclear and they appealed to the district's legal office for clarification. In the process, these central office administrators suggested the central office could modify the rules and raised sites' hopes that the requirements could be adapted. While waiting for a legal ruling,

frontline central office administrators and site directors consumed over a month (approximately 6 hours and 35 minutes of formal meeting time) debating what should constitute district policy—time that proved wasted when participants realized they did not have the flexibility to craft their own rules. Nor did participants consider whether the federal and state rules actually inhibited site implementation. The omission of such consideration suggests a disconnection between the proposed policy and sites' practice or, in organizational learning terms, limited if any interpretation of information from sites.

Knowledge of public systems other than the district central office also proved fundamental to building policy from practice. Sites comprised multiple agencies from various jurisdictions and therefore the city and county had potentially important roles to play in policy development. However, sites' relationships with public agencies varied. When asked about their connections with policy makers, Village Center and Healthy Start site representatives generally indicated that they had closer ties with Oakland Unified School District than with other agencies; representatives from community clusters funded by the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth reported better access to staff members of the City Manager's Office and representatives of the city council. Central office administrators and other policy makers with limited cross-systems knowledge tended to make decisions about site support not based on sites' experiences and plans but based on what they believed their own agency could expertly provide. As one city administrator explained,

Sites' demands are complex, complicated. I am not sure who [which agency] needs to do which piece. So I think, I guess I tend to think about it more in terms of what we [my agency] can offer. I don't know if they need it but I'm assuming that we should be able to provide . . . support.

A county agency director observed that when central office administrators built policy from their own expertise rather than sites' practice, they increased sites' fervor to advocate for specific policy changes rather than to share information about their practice:

Until we have people out in the field doing the analysis we just have conjecture. Then you get 100 providers in line who want to provide certain services. They [sites] will want to find problems that feed these solutions.

Social/political ties with sites and systems. Observations and interviews revealed the importance of central office administrators' social/political ties with sites and within policy systems to building policy from practice.

With regard to site ties, central office administrators typically indicated that sites' funding applications and contracts provided information about sites' intentions and that similar documents were primary sources of information about schools for their central office colleagues in curriculum, evaluation, and business services. They highlighted that for them the "real deal"—meaning information about sites' actual day-to-day practice—came through direct relationships with sites that they established over time. When asked whether and how they shared information about their goals and strategies with the district central office, sites often referred to individual central office administrators with whom they had developed long-term direct relationships.

Almost all respondents indicated that such ties between individual central office administrators and site directors were critical especially in Oakland where years of city-level governments' nonresponsiveness to neighborhood concerns fueled sites' unwillingness to share information. As further evidence of this government-neighborhood rift, site directors typically pointed out that they generally had weak ties with Oakland Unified School District writ large and they did not trust the school district as an institution with detailed information about their implementation experiences, but they wanted to share information with the individual central office administrators with whom they had worked over at least several years. For example, one long-standing frontline central office administrator indicated that individual site directors contacted him at least weekly. This tally, confirmed by site directors, stood out in the context of observational data from multiple meetings at which site directors expressed significant dissatisfaction with that central office administrator. In interviews, these site directors indicated that even though other central office administrators were typically more responsive, at least this central office administrator was a "known quality" and "trustworthy" when it came to information about their implementation difficulties; they would rather share information safely and receive infrequent responses than risk the information "falling into the wrong hands." A newer frontline central office administrator, characterized by sites as "with it," "professional", and "responsive" had to make frequent site visits, as the central office administrator explained, "to establish the kinds of partnerships with principals and lead [community] agencies so the information comes more easily."

Strong systems ties—relationships within the district central office—also proved important, particularly for frontline central office administrators. As indicated above, using information about sites' plans and experiences often required district central office action beyond what frontline administrators could accomplish within their own span of authority. The frontline central office administrators who most frequently attempted to usher policy changes

through the central office pointed to their regular communication with senior central office administrators and the school board as the key to their success. These connected frontline central office administrators stated and demonstrated that their communications with senior central office administrators increased the likelihood that these senior administrators trusted them and would take action on their request. Frequent contact also helped frontline central office administrators understand how to sell site supports—how to translate complex site experiences into terms palatable to senior central office administrators and elected officials. As one central office administrator explained with regard to his lack of such ties,

When we [a colleague and myself] go to them [senior administrators and school board members] for . . . funding [for sites], they are always asking, why are you doing this . . . ? We don't have products, something that is tangible and concrete [specific recommendations for central office policy changes]. We invite them so infrequently to events and as a marketing thing they don't see that this matters to [academic] achievement. They don't link it, because of the infrequency of it. As a personal thing they don't have a reason to return our calls.

Administrative tools. As the earlier comments highlighted, central office administrators typically viewed collaborative policy implementation as requiring them to understand individual sites' practices and to use such information to guide changes in central office policy that might enable that practice. Central office administrators pointed to specific administrative tools—the structure of their workday, their overall workload, and particular resource allocation mechanisms—as essential both to connecting with sites (search) and to developing policy (use).

Observations and interviews revealed that the structure of frontline central office administrators' workday and their overall workload significantly affected their ability to search. These administrators typically pointed out that capturing information about sites' practice required that they spend considerable time engaging with site directors. Even frontline central office administrators who previously had directed sites indicated the need for time on site; they typically reported that their previous experience gave them a general sense of site issues but not sites' specific current challenges. The central office increased the sheer number of person hours spent with sites by dedicating new central office positions solely to site work, by hiring consultants, and by adding site work on to the responsibilities of other central office staff.

Senior central office administrators and site directors in particular highlighted that using information from practice required new central office mechanisms for resource allocation. Central office administrators described the importance of resource allocation mechanisms that could handle

complex, individual site budgets rather than the routine, uniform allocation of funds across sites or by preset formula, accounting systems that could accommodate nontraditional payment categories, and procedures for adding and deleting budget categories quickly and on a site-by-site basis. In addition, site directors frequently pointed out with some urgency at meetings with central office administrators that sites typically did not have budgets sufficient to weather the many unforeseen costs that arose during implementation and bill the district central office after the fact, as was typical central office practice for disbursing funds to non-school agencies.

Central office administrators across all four policy initiatives most often relied on Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs)—contracts with each site—for such site-by-site policy development, including resource allocation and accountability for advance site payments. Unlike some other forms of contracts that specified sites' responsibilities, MOUs typically delineated both site and central office commitments. For some, MOUs made the difference between policy talk and action. According to one prominent education advisor in Oakland, "Everything we do should lead to some legislative or similar recommendations that can be enacted, become MOUs. Concrete policy changes versus talk about policy changes."

MOUs also increased demands on central office administrators' time and the urgency for the workload adjustments described above. Central office administrators reported that developing MOUs involved negotiating with various parties, crafting agreements, and securing approval from senior central office administrators, central office lawyers, and school board members. Such activities proved labor intensive particularly early in implementation when frontline central office administrators had little experience with MOUs and no template on which to base them.

One central office administrator described these demands:

Initially just I mean it was we had met for about a year. . . . We were kind of spending a lot of time to figure out how to tackle this issue [of deploying staff on a site-by-site basis]. . . . We had to put together an infrastructure from scratch. . . . I think we are still struggling with what it is we need to do but initially it was bringing the key players to the table, getting MOUs, getting commitments, to try to figure out this thing called collaboration.

Most participants highlighted that demands on the central office to develop their formal infrastructure for site-by-site resource allocation increased sharply over the course of the 1990s in Oakland when the number of participating sites climbed from 2 in 1992 to 29 in 2000.

Systematic Variations in Capital

I found evidence of search and use and the three forms of capital during implementation of all four focal policies but systematic variations among central office administrators in terms of their capital. In this section, I present three findings about these variations. First, frontline central office administrators tended to have strong site knowledge and ties and to search relatively often but limited systems knowledge and ties for policy development. Conversely, senior central office administrators had the systems knowledge and ties and the authority to create new tools fundamental to developing policy but limited site knowledge and ties to guide policy development. Second, site knowledge/ties and systems knowledge/ties appeared as a trade-off for frontline central office administrators: Frontline central office administrators' positions on the central office periphery seemed to increase their site knowledge and ties but limit their systems knowledge and ties; as they increased their systems knowledge and ties, they weakened their site knowledge and ties. Third, over time, this trade-off presented a paradox: Positions on the organizational periphery of the central office appeared conducive both to search and to vulnerabilities that limited search.

Differential Resources Within the Central Office

As others have shown, school district central offices and other public bureaucracies are not monolithic (Spillane, 1996; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977; Wilson, 1989). Rather, individuals within such organizations differ in their experiences, professional positions, demands, and resources. Likewise, the Oakland case revealed that central office administrators' capacity for search and use varied systematically between two distinct groups: frontline and senior central office administrators.

Frontline central office administrators tended to have stronger site knowledge and ties and to search more often than senior central office administrators. As partial evidence of this differential capital, during interviews, frontline central office administrators described in detail the strengths and weaknesses of specific sites whereas senior central office administrators deferred to frontline "staff members" to answer site-specific questions. Observations and records of central office-site meetings revealed that frontline central office administrators participated in the vast majority of these meetings. Site directors named frontline central office administrators as their main points of contact with the central office; some site directors highlighted that

they called particular frontline administrators several times a week to discuss various implementation challenges.

The relative strength of frontline central office administrators' site knowledge and ties was no accident. Senior and frontline central office administrators alike consistently reported that the frontline central office positions were originally designed to dedicate new, full-time staff to specialize in site knowledge and ties. Frontline central office positions are typically entry level in civil service employment systems and therefore the positions into which senior administrators with relative ease could hire people with limited central office experience but significant site experience.

However, frontline central office administrators consistently reported and demonstrated weak systems knowledge and ties compared to senior central office administrators. The instance of background screenings for community members working at schools cited above provides a typical example of how a lack of systems knowledge resulted in frontline central office administrators' presenting inaccurate information, perpetuating confusion, and, ultimately, losing opportunities to use their site knowledge to inform central office policy. Senior central office administrators may have contributed to frontline central office administrators' relatively weak systems knowledge and ties. Several frontline central office administrators indicated that senior central office administrators occasionally signaled that frontline central office administrators should not consult with their senior colleagues. One frontline central office administrator summed up these messages:

It's been kind of—don't bring me any mess. So I generally don't bring site issues up [with senior central office administrators]. That's unfortunate because while there is what we call tacit approval it's not out in the front. [These administrators don't say.] "Yes this is how it is and I fully understand," you know. You can see the downsides of that . . . they don't always see that this matters to [academic] achievement. They don't link it, because of the infrequency of it.

Senior central office administrators typically had the systems knowledge and ties that frontline central office administrators lacked. These resources stemmed in part from senior central office administrators' longer central office tenures and from their professional authority to set central office policy. However, senior central office administrators tended not to have site knowledge and ties to guide central office policy changes. For example, when asked what they knew about site implementation, senior central office administrators almost invariably reported familiarity with one long-standing, well-publicized site (Oakland School Linked Services Work Group, 1999)

or deferred to the frontline central office administrators to address those questions.

Resource Trade-Offs and the Paradox of the Periphery

In the short term, central office administrators' positions within the central office seemed to increase their site knowledge and ties at the expense of their systems knowledge and ties. Over time, these administrators faced pressures to develop their systems knowledge and ties, and in the process, they seemed to weaken their site knowledge and ties. Paradoxically, their frontline positions seemed to facilitate search and to increase pressures that limited search.

As indicated above, individuals hired into frontline central office positions typically had site rather than systems experience. When asked about their job responsibilities during their first 3 to 6 months on the job, frontline central office administrators often reported spending most of their time working on site implementation challenges and otherwise increasing their site knowledge and ties. During subsequent months, senior central office administrators added new responsibilities to frontline central office administrators' caseloads that often involved work with other central office administrators "across the street." Frontline central office administrators invariably reported that these new responsibilities increased their familiarity with and connections to the central office but diverted time from their work with sites and thereby decreased their site knowledge and ties.

For example, one frontline central office administrator initially assigned exclusively to one of the collaborative policy initiatives, eventually oversaw truancy centers, after-school programs, parent involvement, and mentoring. This frontline central office administrator described his challenge:

Zero. [That's how much time I spent with sites last week.] Well, actually maybe five percent. . . . That was about as deep as I was able to get into it last week even though I needed to get deeper. . . . The thing is I am going to meetings [for my other responsibilities]. They might start at 7:30 (a.m.). . . . The next one is at 9:00. The next one is at 11:00. Then there is one at 1:30, one at 3:00, and then when do I get to come in here [to the office]? Maybe at 4:15 I get to come in here and then you have voicemail messages and it takes me 30 minutes to listen to that and then I have got to return those phone calls and that doesn't give me a chance to get to the work.

One long-standing central office administrator described this trade-off as a pattern:

Once we launched the Healthy Start program and it came out of [a frontline central office division] and it grew to four or five schools. . . . It [my competing responsibilities] got to the point where we realized, wow, now I had so much else on my plate that we really needed to bring in somebody [to focus on sites]. . . . We hired S—. . . . The same thing happened to him. Then we got L—. . . . If you are capable and I think L— is, it's inevitable that stuff comes up. You're going to get a little bit of L—'s time and pretty soon it just, the quicksand starts sucking you down [away from sites]. And that's just the way it is in a bureaucracy. . . . It's inevitable.

Frontline central administrators reported that they did not receive instructions to prioritize their additional, more traditional central office responsibilities but that in the face of competing demands they typically focused on their traditional responsibilities. These administrators reported that they viewed the traditional responsibilities as "time sensitive" or "crises" and that they had little choice but to respond even at the sacrifice of time spent on search activities.

Organizational learning theory offers an additional explanation that highlights a paradox. According to theory, decision makers in ambiguous situations receive little definitive feedback on their performance and tend to look for models of appropriate and legitimate behavior to serve as professional guides irrespective of objective outcomes (March & Olsen, 1975, 1976). Oakland's frontline central office administrators would have been particularly eager to find such models. They received little feedback on the effectiveness of their own work, and as new central office employees, they had weak job security and strong incentives to demonstrate their value if for no other reason than to keep their jobs. Frontline central office positions were relatively new and the central office offered few models of appropriate and legitimate frontline practice but multiple models of traditional practice (i.e., mandating practice with policy). Given such conditions, frontline central office administrators would have been inclined to seek professional role models, to find and follow models inconsistent with their nontraditional roles, to weaken their site knowledge and ties, and ultimately, to curtail their search activities. In sum, the very qualities that made frontline central office administrators inclined to search—nontraditional experiences and roles—also, overtime, limited their resources for search and their actual choices to search.

In support of this interpretation, during interviews many frontline central office administrators expressed concerns about whether they were "doing it right" (fulfilling their frontline central office responsibilities). When asked about professional role models, frontline central office administrators typi-

cally pointed to central office administrators across the street as their formal or informal mentors. Chances are that the frontline central office administrators' primary professional guides were not skilled at search. A comprehensive state audit of the district central office reported that most central office administrators were not trained to support sites' decision making (Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team, 2000). The interim superintendent agreed:

Because of the diversity of the community and of this district and of the individual people working here there has always been the feeling that no one size fits all and those decisions are best left to school-site personnel including parents and community members. Problem is, none of these [central office] folks have the training in supporting that kind of decision making.

Two frontline central office administrators reported relatively high confidence in their frontline performance and seemed to maintain their site knowledge and ties over longer periods of time than others. When asked to reflect on the sources of their confidence, these respondents recalled trips they had taken to other districts where they met with their central office counterparts who were grappling with similar frontline central office challenges. They indicated that these trips taught them that Oakland was not underperforming relative to other districts and that they were not alone in their professional struggles. One central office administrator indicated that she could take risks because she did not fear losing her job. She said, "I don't care what he [the interim superintendent] says. I don't need this job. I can go always go back [to my school]."

In sum, frontline central office administrators faced a paradox—what I call the paradox of the periphery. To increase the central office's site knowledge and ties, senior central office administrators created new frontline positions into which they hired nontraditional staff willing and able to take risks and otherwise engage in search. However, as new, nontraditional employees in peripheral positions—the very factors that enhanced to site knowledge and ties—frontline central office administrators had weak resources for helping the central office use information about sites' practice to develop policy. Over time, frontline central office administrators faced pressures to adopt more traditional central office administrative roles; these roles enhanced their systems knowledge and ties but at the expense of their site knowledge and ties and, ultimately, their choices to search. Paradoxically, peripheral central office positions both enabled and limited search.

SUMMARY, CONTRIBUTIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

This article addressed two key questions: What are appropriate and productive roles for district central office administrators in collaborative policy implementation and what capacity do such roles require? These questions were inspired by the proliferation of public policies recommending or requiring school-community partnerships, the recurrent theme in research that school district central offices matter to the implementation of school-community partnerships, and the glaring lack of information about central office administrators in the process. This study underscores that central office administrators' roles and capacity depart significantly from administration-as-usual and involve building policy from practice.

Theories of organizational learning under conditions of ambiguity outlined some dimensions of central office administrators' roles and capacity for building policy from practice. I describe organizational learning as a process whereby central office administrators search for information about schools' collaborative practice and use that information as the basis for central office policy changes aimed to support that practice. Advocacy campaigns and traditional public sector feedback loops tend to involve adversarial, one-time central office-site interactions. Organizational learning by contrast involves the continual search for and use of information about sites' practice. These processes occur along at least three interrelated levels: individual central office administrators, central office organization, and site-central office relationships.

The capacity for such roles includes threshold conditions—factors necessary but not sufficient for organizational learning. Organizational learning theory predicts some of these conditions and I discovered two others: preemptive policy actions and site readiness. By distinguishing among these conditions as contextual, central office organizational, or site-specific, I suggest that central office administrators may have influence over some but not all of these conditions. In another extension of organizational learning theory, I found that central office administrators' capacity includes particular forms of capital—site and systems knowledge, site and systems ties, and administrative tools for site-by-site support. I found that these resources were more readily available and cultivated in different parts of the central office and that building policy from practice may require a division of labor between those who search for information and those who use it, at least in the short term. In other words, public bureaucracies can organize for significant changes in performance without blowing up or banishing bureaucracy (Barzelay, 1992; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). Rather tried-and-true bureaucratic forms such as hierarchy and division of labor can strategically leverage new central office

roles and capacity. I also raise a caution about this division of labor—the paradox of the periphery. Frontline central offices positions by design may enable search but ultimately contribute to pressures that limit search. Central offices that use this division of labor productively likely will be those that attend to its adverse consequences.

Implications for Research

This study highlights organizational learning theory as an important framework for examining the implementation of complex change efforts such as collaborative education policy. This study rests on the shoulders of several education scholars who put organizational learning on the school improvement map. I extend organizational learning research in education and other sectors in several ways that have implications for future research.

First, I draw on theories of organizational learning under conditions of ambiguity. This theoretical strand highlights that organizational learning occurs not within single organizations such as a school or a school district central office but between organizations; a view of Oakland's implementation process solely from within the district central office would have omitted the multiple conditions external to the district central office that affected implementation and obscured the search process almost entirely. Educational researchers may find this strand of organizational learning theory appropriate to studies of school improvement and various other policy demands.

Second, much of the original empirical groundwork for organizational learning theory comes from studies of private firms. The Oakland case shows that public bureaucracies too can learn and that public sector learning may require various forms of capacity not captured by private sector studies. These findings raise the following question: Does the capacity for organizational learning in the public sector identified here apply to private firms?

Third, this study confirms that models of nontraditional professional practice may be essential to the implementation of new professional practice. However, the following question remains for direct investigations of settings in which appropriate models are more readily available: Given the availability of such models—a condition not adequately met in Oakland—under what conditions will central office administrators actually choose those models over others? Studies of private firms have demonstrated that organizational actors face multiple and sometimes competing professional demands (March, 1994a; Weick, 1995). Oakland's frontline central office administrators operated in a system with at least two logics of appropriate action: one promoting nontraditional frontline roles and one reinforcing traditional forms of central office administration. Under what conditions will frontline

central office administrators choose nontraditional roles over the long term? Would other supports steer central office administrators' choices such as limiting frontline central office administrators' additional responsibilities or increasing their sense of job security?

Importantly, findings from this study come from a single albeit strategic case. Findings from such cases are not directly generalizable to populations but may define concepts to inform theory and to guide future research. This study's findings present a set of concepts that can focus research in other settings. Research that shines a light specifically on the constructs elaborated here may deepen understanding of how these constructs play out in practice in other districts and broaden knowledge of their applicability to public and private sector bureaucracies.

Implications for Practice

This study raises fundamental questions about what central office administrators who want to support collaborative education policy implementation should know and be able to do. These questions highlight new directions for practice and issues for educational leaders to consider.

First, central office administrators can create specialized, peripheral positions that increase the central office's capacity for search. However, such positions may strain the ability of those individuals to use information from practice to develop central office policy. How can educational leaders maximize the benefits of such a division of labor and minimize the adverse consequences? The Oakland case suggests two avenues for experimentation in practice that may find support in future research. One, as mentioned above, future practice and research may reveal that models of professional practice appropriate to collaborative education policy help frontline central office administrators to feel they are "doing it right" and in fact to build policy from practice. Second, central offices can strengthen coordination with the central office. Just as Oakland's frontline central office administrators occasionally did not search for information about sites' practice, senior central office administrators did not always seek information from frontline central office administrators and occasionally gave explicit instructions—"Don't bring me any mess." Research on superiors and subordinates in organizations suggests that senior central office administrators may have little experience with or resources for treating frontline central administrators as having expert knowledge (Barley, 1996; Barzelay, 1992; Blau, 1963; Brown & Duguid, 1995). How can district central offices cultivate relationships between frontline and senior central office administrators essential to building policy from practice?

Finally, the central office roles and capacity elaborated here provide at least an initial set of guides for what implementation of collaborative education policy requires. With these guides, educational leaders can make better assessments regarding whether the results achieved by school-community partnerships stem from their choice of strategy or the completeness of their implementation. Importantly, however, this study provides a new way of thinking about central office administrators as professionals and central offices as workplaces. Even if subsequent studies do not link these forms of administration and bureaucratic operations to demonstrable improvements in the status of students, future research and experience may suggest other reasons why such public sector reform may be valuable.

NOTES

1. One exception is Herrington's (1994) examination of 22 school principals and 5 superintendents in Florida. However, Herrington's study focuses primarily on central office administrators' perceptions of collaboration as a policy idea, not their roles and capacity in practice.

2. This distinction between individual and collective learning may actually grow increasingly blurry as sociocultural theories of learning become further developed and used. These theories posit that individual learning occurs through engagement in collectives or communities of practice (Lave, 1993; Rogoff, 1994; Wenger, 1998).

3. Search and use within the field of organizational studies typically go by the terms *exploration* and *exploitation*. Because exploitation has a variety of unrelated and potentially distracting meanings within the applied field of education, at the suggestion of several reviewers, I chose alternative labels for these concepts.

4. Community Organization is a pseudonym.

5. This estimate of participation comes from unduplicated counts of schools named in funded Healthy Start and Village Center grant applications and a conservative approximation of schools likely participating in programs of the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth. The Oakland Child Health and Safety Initiative supported Village Center sites. See Table 1 for further discussion of policy scope.

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