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No Small Thing: School District Central Office Bureaucracies and the Implementation of New Small Autonomous Schools Initiatives

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New small autonomous schools initiatives are relatively recent educational change strategies that in some urban districts aim to remake how district central offices function as institutions. In this article, the author draws on theories of organizational innovation and learning to reveal how central office administrators participate in these change processes, what outcomes are associated with their efforts, and the conditions that help or hinder their work. The data came from a 3-year qualitative investigation of these dynamics in two districts. The results show that particular bridging and buffering activities by certain central office administrators were consistent with policy goals and linked to increasing district supports for implementation. Particular dimensions of the institutional environments of central offices shaped central office administrators' choices and actions.

KEYWORDS: district central offices, implementation, new small autonomous schools, organizational learning theory

Urban school districts nationwide have launched new small autonomous schools initiatives that place nontraditional demands on district central office bureaucracies to support their implementation. These initiatives generally aim to convert large high schools into multiple, smaller, more

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autonomous schools and to create new small autonomous schools of various types. They call on school district central office bureaucracies to enable implementation by transforming themselves from regulatory agencies that treat schools relatively uniformly to dynamic, entrepreneurial organizations that seed and support systems of autonomous and differentiated schools. Many of these initiatives rest on a theory of change that posits that the sheer diversity of students in mid-sized to large urban districts increases the urgency to reinvent schools into newer, smaller, more autonomous units. In turn, district central offices would expand student learning districtwide if they helped schools make key decisions about how to support their students rather than mainly directed schools' decisions. A growing body of school-focused research reveals that these initiatives are posting some positive results. But how are urban school district central offices engaging these new institutional demands? The school-focused research includes many examples of central offices stifling implementation but is virtually silent about how central offices *enable* implementation.

In this article, I address this research gap with results from a comparative, qualitative case study of urban school district central office administrators working to enable the implementation of new small autonomous schools initiatives in Oakland, California, and Chicago. I examined the following questions: How do central office administrators participate in the implementation of these initiatives? With what results? What conditions seem to mediate their participation and attendant outcomes?

Using theories of organizational innovation and learning as my conceptual framework for data collection and analysis, I found that central office administrators in small schools offices—offices dedicated to the implementation of new small autonomous school initiatives—participated in implementation in ways consistent with the new policy demands and associated with such positive results as enhancing central office supports for implementation. These central office administrators bridged participating schools to the rest of the central office to affect changes in central office and school policies and practices that promised to fuel school implementation. They also buffered schools and the central office from each other also to enable implementation. In so doing, central office administrators sometimes supported implementation by working to change central office policies and practices, but at other times, they enabled implementation by helping schools work well within existing central office rules. These findings suggest that the problem of improving central office participation in implementation is not mainly a technical problem of developing supportive formal central office policies. Rather, implementation presents an institutional challenge for central office administrators to shift how they engage in their own work and in their relationships with schools. Particular institutional conditions influenced central office administrators' participation. I elaborate on these points in the subsections below and conclude with implications for understanding school district central offices as institutions.

Background

The designs of new small autonomous schools initiatives reflect or explicitly build on research that suggests creating schools anew (Rhodes et al., 2005), small school size (Bickel & Howley, 2000; Holland, 2002; Howley & Howley, 2004; Lee & Loeb, 2000; Pittman & Haughwout, 1987), and school autonomy (Center for Collaborative Education, 2001, 2007; Johnson & Landman, 2000) may improve supports for all students' learning, particularly in racially and ethnically diverse urban districts (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Lee & Smith, 1997; McLaughlin, 1991). Scholars argue that the opportunity to create new schools helps increase teacher engagement and the likelihood that schools will depart from traditional institutional patterns of schooling in ways that strengthen the relevance and rigor of school programs. Small schools may foster strong relationships among teachers and students and otherwise address problems of student anonymity and lack of connectedness to school that may frustrate learning, especially in high schools. With increased school autonomy, school leaders will have opportunities to focus their school programs on students' needs and strengths rather than, for example, mainly complying with external demands.

Early studies of new small autonomous schools initiatives that combine all three elements generally focused on schools. The findings suggested that participating schools are posting some modest improvements in students' school experience and learning (American Institutes for Research & SRI International, 2003; Spote, Correa, Kahne, & Easton, 2003). District central offices occasionally appear in the background of these studies as implementation curbs, providing inadequate resources or failing to shift their formal policies in ways that support implementation (e.g., Darling-Hammond, Aness, & Ort, 2002; Raywid, 2002; Raywid, Schmerler, Phillips, & Smith, 2003; Spote et al., 2003; Wallach & Gallucci, 2004; Wallach & Lear, 2003). These depictions of central offices echo those in studies of school-based management initiatives of the 1990s. Central offices appeared in these studies as failing to shift their relationships with schools from top-down regulatory relationships to relationships in which they enable school autonomy (e.g., Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990; Walker, 2002).

While compelling for their consistency, such findings about central offices generally rest on weak empirical evidence and therefore may provide limited guides for research and practice. A review of approximately 30 peer-reviewed articles and reports on new small autonomous schools initiatives revealed that researchers tend to draw conclusions about central offices from a handful of onetime interviews with central office administrators or surveys of school principals regarding what and how well central office administrators are doing (Honig & Rainey, April 2009). Single self-reports and principals' reports provide important perspectives on central office participation. But especially since much of central office administrators' work unfolds over time and beyond the view of school principals, such data sources are significantly limited in what they capture about what central office administrators actually do.

A second limitation of this literature is that it tends to conclude that central offices would enable implementation if they reformed their formal organizational structures and policies to better align with initiative goals (e.g., American Institutes for Research & SRI International, 2003, 2004; Raywid, 2002; Raywid et al., 2003). Such formal changes may be important to implementation but they do not address the significant human dimensions of how central offices matter to various change initiatives. Other studies suggest that how central office administrators understand and engage in their work day to day is essential to the implementation of ambitious educational improvement strategies (e.g., Agullard & Goughnour, 2006; Spillane, 1996). Even in districts that adopt the kinds of “aligned” and “coherent” formal policy frameworks that some of the studies recommend, the implementation of educational improvement strategies still suffers from central office administrators’ limited capacity to participate in implementation (Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001; Hubbard, Stein, & Meehan, 2006). My own studies demonstrated how central office administrators can work in between central offices and schools to enable the implementation of challenging improvement strategies, even where various formal policies conflict with those strategies (Honig, 2006). Such studies suggest the importance of central office administrators to implementation but, with few exceptions, generally as curbs on the implementation of centralized policy initiatives distinctly different from new small autonomous schools initiatives.

I then turned to research on public bureaucracies to conceptualize how these institutions manage the kinds of nontraditional demands that new small autonomous schools initiatives present for school district central office bureaucracies. Much of this literature suggests that bureaucratic institutions such as district central offices were established to routinize public-sector demands and to regulate the organizations they oversee in a Weberian hierarchical fashion (Downs, 1967; Dunphy, Herbig, & Howes, 1996; Kanter, 1988; Skowronek, 1982; Weiss, 1979) not to seed and support differentiation and autonomy among those organizations. But some bureaucracy scholars clarify that it is the traditional *formal structures* of bureaucratic institutions that conflict with the management of nonroutine problems. *People* in public bureaucracies under certain circumstances deviate from such formal structures, accommodate nontraditional demands, and thereby realize various complex organizational goals (Barzelay, 1992; Blau, 1963; Wilson, 1989). In one classic study, bureaucrats collaborated with one another, despite formal rules against such consultations, and handled unexpected situations effectively (Blau, 1963; see also Barzelay, 1992); these informal bureaucratic structures—bureaucrats’ day-to-day work practices and relationships with others—enabled bureaucratic change.

The research above suggests that future studies of new small autonomous schools initiatives should focus on how central offices administrators participate in implementation. Such studies should examine the day-to-day participation of central office administrators in implementation in which conditions seem ripe for them to engage in the arguably nonroutine work practices these initiatives demand. Ultimately, such participation matters to

the extent that it actually contributes to improved student learning. Given the nascent stage of research in this area, empirical elaborations of central office administrators' participation can help future researchers better determine whether learning outcomes stem from the design of the initiatives or from how central office administrators participate in their implementation.

Conceptual Framework

For my conceptual framework, I turned to a subset of administration and management literature on organizational innovation and learning that elaborates how people in formal organizations manage nonroutine demands consistent with those that new small autonomous schools initiatives place on school district central offices. These demands include establishing relationships with other organizations (in this case, schools) that promise to foster their differentiation and helping them develop the capacity to chart their own directions for improvement.

This literature elaborates that people who face such nonroutine challenges must *continually invent how they participate in their work on the job* (Kanter, 1988; Kimberly, 1981). In the process, these people unavoidably experience *means-ends ambiguity* (March, 1994; March & Olsen, 1979; Van de Ven & Polley, 1992): ambiguity regarding such fundamental dimensions of their work as whether what they are doing actually contributes to particular outcomes. Given such ambiguity, researchers should count *intentionality of benefit*, whether participants aim to improve particular outcomes, as an important implementation outcome in and of itself (Kanter, 1988; Kimberly, 1981; West & Altink, 1996).

Engaging such work demands is a fundamentally *social process*, so much so that Van de Ven (1986) argued that such work involves "managing increasing bundles of transactions over time. Transactions are 'deals' or exchanges which tie people together within an institutional framework" (p. 597; see also Steyaert, Bouwen, & Looy, 1996; Yates, 1978). Some characterize these processes as coalition building and emphasize the importance of building political ties to enable the work (Kanter, 1988; Steyaert et al., 1996).

Organizations sometimes appoint specific people, called *boundary spanners*, to engage in these exchanges by working between their home organization and other organizations to enable the flow of information and other resources that might help fuel organizational goals (Damanpour, 1991; Delaney, Jarley, & Fiorito, 1996; Kanter, 1988; Steyaert et al., 1996; see also Honig, 2006). Boundary spanners often sit in organizational units on the hierarchical margins of their organizations. There, they sometimes find a work context more hospitable to nonroutine work practices than offices higher in the hierarchy and a context that puts them in greater proximity to external parties (such as schools, in this case). Such positions may also frustrate their efforts, for example, when their separation from their home organization hampers their ability to bring resources into their organization. Boundary spanners' work fundamentally involves *managing such tensions over time* (Kanter, 1988; Kimberly, 1981; van de Ven, 1986; Van de Ven & Polley, 1992).

These findings trained my attention on people in boundary-spanning positions who intend to enable implementation. The findings suggest that researchers should avoid premature judgments about their success or failure and focus on understanding the dynamics of their participation in implementation over time, especially their efforts to develop and engage in social processes that seem consistent with fostering the implementation of new small autonomous schools. What, then, are those forms of participation?

This research reveals two broad categories of activities that seemed consistent with demands on central office administrators to enable new small autonomous schools implementation: bridging and buffering. *Bridging activities* bring organizations in greater contact with their environments to garnering information and other resources they might use to deepen or change organizational activities and ultimately achieve organizational goals (Gladstein & Caldwell, 1985; Pfeffer, 1981; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). In the present policy context, bridging activities might include those that increase the flow of information between schools and central offices to enable implementation. Such information might relate to schools' goals and implementation strategies or their actual experiences with implementation (Honig, 2003). Some scholars draw on theories of organizational learning from experience to elaborate that such information management activities involve searching for information and encoding that information into organizational rules (Kanter, 1988).¹ Such rules might include formal central office or school policies, how people participate day to day in their work, and how they think and make decisions about their work (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Barley, 1986; Brown & Duguid, 1991; Leithwood, Leonard, & Sharratt, 1998; March, 1994; Vaughn, 1996).

Buffering, or "avoidance" (Oliver, 1991), involves "attempt(s) to reduce the extent to which [an organization] is externally inspected, scrutinized, or evaluated by partially detaching or decoupling its technical activities from external contact" (Oliver, 1991, p. 155; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Through resource-based buffering, actors increase an organization's slack resources: resources beyond those an organization needs to achieve its targets and those usually associated with "slack search" or exploration for new ideas (Damanpour, 1991; Miner, Bassoff, & Moorman, 2001). Through institutional buffering, organizations insulate themselves by increasing their legitimacy. Buffering in the present case might include central office administrators' efforts to limit contact between schools and other central office administrators and/or central office policies. A central office administrator might curtail such contact by providing funding to schools to lessen schools' dependence on central office resources, especially those that open schools up to evaluative inspection by other central office administrators (resource-based buffering). Central office administrators also might improve other central office administrators' perceptions of participating schools in ways that limit the likelihood that they would intervene with them (institutional buffering). Likewise some central office administrators might shield other central office administrators from schools' demands in ways that limit their impetus to change central office policies and practices.

Methods

These concepts grounded a multiyear, qualitative, comparative case study of new small autonomous schools initiatives in two districts. I selected Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) in California, in part because both districts by the start of my data collection had begun to implement significant new small autonomous schools initiatives (the Chicago High School Redesign Initiative [CHSRI] and Oakland's New Small Autonomous Schools Initiative) as main strategies to improve school performance districtwide, especially in traditionally underserved neighborhoods. The infusion of new fiscal resources and high-level political support for implementation in both districts suggested that implementation might not be stymied by these predictable implementation impediments. As evidence of the latter, both districts received major implementation grants from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which local foundations and other funders matched. By many accounts, the executive officers in these districts were long-time champions of such initiatives. Preliminary document reviews and interviews confirmed that central office administrators in both districts aimed to support implementation in ways consistent with policy demands and my conceptual framework.²

I also selected CPS and OUSD because both district central offices organized around an implementation strategy that my conceptual framework suggested might be important to implementation: the creation of a new unit within the district central office to span central office–school boundaries to support implementation. The administrators in these small schools offices (SSOs) became the focus of my analysis. Most staff members of these offices were new to central office positions and as such, per my own and others' previous research, came to their work potentially unhampered by traditional central office roles and routines that threatened implementation (Honig, 2006). These districts also presented different work contexts for comparison. For example, CPS had more high schools (close to 100) than OUSD had schools at any level (92). While neither CPS nor OUSD at the time was a resource-rich district, OUSD labored under significant budget challenges not as prominent in CPS.

I defined data collection periods long enough for revealing how implementation unfolded in real time over time and that seemed bounded by events of local significance and analytical relevance to my study (Cznariawska, 1997). In both districts, my start year of real-time data collection (2000 in OUSD and 2003 in CPS) corresponded with the first full year of implementation of the new small autonomous schools policy. I ended data collection in OUSD in 2003, when the district fell under a state administrator; while implementation continued, the significant shift in governance indicated a major institutional change and a logical and locally meaningful stopping point. Likewise, in Chicago, 2006 corresponded with a more gradual but also distinct shift in initiative governance with the appointment of an area instructional officer (AIO) to supervise the new small autonomous schools' principals and the

folding of the initiative under the umbrella of another major policy initiative, Renaissance 2010.³

Data Collection and Analysis

My main data sources were interviews, observations, and documents. In OUSD, I conducted 60 interviews with 45 respondents. In CPS, I conducted 78 interviews with 44 respondents. I interviewed SSO administrators between 1 and 7 times depending on their tenure during my study period. I first interviewed all central office administrators assigned to boundary-spanning positions in implementation: administrators in central office SSOs. Given the importance of social interactions to implementation, I then used a snowball sampling strategy to select other central office administrators whom the small schools staff identified as their frequent or necessary contacts (e.g., directors and superintendents of major central office departments). I interviewed other prominent implementation participants, such as school reform support providers, union representatives, and school board members.

I collected school-level data on the basis of data collection opportunities presented by each site. At the time of my data collection, CPS participated in major local and national evaluations of their initiatives (e.g. Kahne, Spote, de la Torre, & Easton, 2006; Spote et al., 2003). These other projects offered substantial data from principals and some school-level observational data that mirrored what I would have collected on my own. Accordingly, I relied on those reports as a main source of CPS school-level data for my central office-focused study. In OUSD, such data were unavailable, so I interviewed a sample of the first six new small autonomous school principals plus other principals who participated in implementation.

I collected data on various meetings in which central office administrators participated during implementation. My geographic proximity to OUSD enabled me to directly observe some meetings. In CPS, I collected official minutes from a significant number of policy meetings related to the initiative (many of which were closed-door meetings). I also conducted extensive reviews of documents such as newspaper articles, formal policies, and internal e-mail messages. As part of each site visit, I wrote detailed field notes to highlight key themes from interviews and observable dimensions of the institutional setting in which central office administrators worked.

I analyzed my data for this article using NVivo software in two main phases. In the initial organizing phase, I coded all data by their type of source and type of speaker or author to help me triangulate data from various sources. I coded for any outcomes associated with these initiatives, including student achievement and attempted or realized policy changes. I also coded data to distinguish how central office administrators intended to participate in implementation from evidence about their actual participation. I separated data that seemed related to a distinct policy startup period immediately after the passage of the board policy in both districts when central office administrators grappled more with how to select and open schools than with issues

of implementing school plans.⁴ I grouped data related to particular areas of work, such as “human resources” or “teaching and learning,” to track how central office administrators addressed particular types of implementation challenges. I derived codes from my conceptual framework (e.g., boundary spanner, bridging, buffering, encoding) to categorize types of activities in which implementation participants engaged, and I tracked activities that did not fit those categories. In the second phase, I reduced my data on central office activities into a progressively smaller and mutually exclusive set of categories until I arrived at what appeared to be a distinct set of activities. I arrayed my data on specific areas of work on a timeline to help me track central office administrators’ engagement in particular issues over time.

This study had limitations that I addressed in particular ways. First, self-reports of people’s work may reflect their intended rather than actual participation. I addressed this limitation in part by cross-tabulating my data on participation by data source and reporting only those activities that I could confirm with at least three data sources, be they interviews with different respondents or a combination of interviews, observations, and documents. I distinguish the source of the claims in my findings section to help readers evaluate for themselves the strength of my evidence. Second, an elaborated conceptual framework can focus data collection in potentially productive ways but also threatens to limit an observer’s ability to recognize other patterns. I addressed this challenge at the point of data collection by focusing my interview questions primarily on central office administrators’ uses of time, broadly speaking, rather than their bridging and buffering efforts in particular. My extensive arrays of data by lines of work over time surfaced implementation events and dynamics that I may have missed had I relied solely on the higher inference codes prompted by my conceptual framework.

Findings

Given differences in the size and complexity of CPS and OUSD, I had anticipated sharp differences between the two districts in terms of SSO administrators’ participation in implementation. However, I found that their participation in both districts involved forms of bridging and buffering. Their other activities included either what I separated as startup activities⁵ or those that I could not verify with at least three sources as described in my methods section. Per my conceptual framework, these activities represent key implementation outcomes in their own right. I also found that these activities seemed associated with other outcomes, such as policy changes to support implementation and increased central office and school capacity for ongoing implementation. Below, I elaborate what bridging and buffering entailed, the extent to which SSO administrators engaged in these activities, and other outcomes of their work.

I also present three other main findings. First, bridging and buffering activities included those that aimed to change central office policies and practices but also efforts to help schools work within existing central office policies

and practices. This distinction confirms my starting arguments that some changes in central offices policies and practices may be important to implementation but that central office supports for implementation may also include other strategies—namely, human strategies of helping people in schools work ably within existing central office policies and practices. Second, while bridging and buffering captured dominant patterns in SSO administrators' participation, there were three main differences between the districts in terms of how they engaged in bridging and buffering. Third, these differences may stem from variations in the institutional environments in which SSO administrators operated that created different opportunities for their participation.

Bridging Schools and the Rest of the Central Office

My data revealed multiple examples of SSO administrators working to enable implementation by bridging or linking schools to the rest of the central office. I surfaced three types of bridging activities: policy and practice development, capacity building, and communicating requirements. Per Table 1, the first two bridging subactivities involved linking with the short- or long-term goal of shifting central office policies and practices to enable school plans and activities that did not fit within current central office policies or practices. The third entailed connecting the central office and schools to bring schools' plans and activities in line with existing central office policies and practices. SSO administrators frequently explained the latter as short-term strategies to enable implementation while they worked to affect policy and practice changes supportive of schools' plans. Accordingly, I categorize that subactivity as an effort to help schools conform to existing central office policies and practices and as an effort to change central office policies and practices to enable schools' plans.

Policy and Practice Development: Linking to Leverage Changes in Central Office Policies and Practices

In both districts, SSO administrators linked other central office administrators to participating schools to leverage changes in district policies and practices to support implementation, both those that would apply to all participating schools and those tailored to individual schools. These activities seemed particularly important to implementation, since the school board policies in both districts that authorized the new small autonomous schools tended to conflict with other school district policies but did not specify how implementation should proceed in light of such contradictions. Many of these linking activities across both districts actually resulted in policy and practice changes, but not all attempts had these results, especially when the changes the central office administrators sought sat at the intersection of multiple central office systems. Below, I first describe what initiative-wide and school-by-school policy and practice development involved. I then elaborate prominent examples of SSO administrators' attempts at policy and practice development that did not result in either.

Table 1
Main Forms of Central Office Administrators' Participation

	Helping Schools Work Within Existing District Policies and Practices	Working to Change District Policies and Practices
Bridging		
Policy/practice development: <i>Linking</i> other central office administrators with evidence from schools' plans and experiences to advocate for immediate district policy and practice changes <i>Main between-district differences</i>		X
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CPS: Linking to change central office policy and practice to include participating schools in resources and opportunities available to other schools • OUSD: Using the example of the new small autonomous schools to guide changes in the central office overall 		
Capacity building: <i>Linking</i> themselves with other central office administrators to build relationships and knowledge for future central office policy and practice changes <i>Main between-district differences</i>		X
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CPS: Limited or no evidence that these linking strategies actually leveraged capacity changes • OUSD: Adequate evidence of an association between these linking strategies and increases in other central office administrators' relationships and knowledge relevant to implementation 		
Communicating requirements: <i>Linking</i> schools to central office and other external demands to influence school policies and practices <i>No main between-district differences</i>	X	X
Buffering		
School-level assistance: <i>Limiting</i> central office intervention with schools by mediating school-level conflicts themselves and coaching school improvement <i>Main between-district differences</i>	X	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These activities appeared prominently in both districts but seemed more frequent in CPS than OUSD 		
Absorbing potential and actual scrutiny: <i>Limiting</i> central office intervention by taking responsibility for schools' deviations from central office policies and practices <i>No main between-district differences</i>	X	

Note. CPS = Chicago Public Schools; OUSD = Oakland Unified School District.

*Initiative-wide policy and practice development.*⁶ Efforts to leverage central office policy and practice changes for all participating schools represented a substantial area of activity for SSO administrators in both districts. In CPS, these activities mainly involved SSO administrators' efforts to develop policies and practices to help the new small autonomous schools access resources and autonomies otherwise available to other schools. In OUSD, SSO administrators often used the example of the new small autonomous schools as the basis for changing policies and practices for all schools. That is, initiative-wide policy and practice development in OUSD appeared as a catalyst for broader central office change, while in CPS, such efforts focused on ensuring the participating schools were included in provisions already available to other CPS schools.

To elaborate, in CPS, when I asked them what they observed SSO administrators doing on the job, other central office administrators tended to use such terms as "advocating," "lobbying," and "pushing" for specific central office reforms to enable implementation. In one typical comment, a central office administrator reported that SSO administrators "fight Budget all the time." In CPS, these activities generally aimed to help participating schools access resources, allowances, and staff otherwise available to other schools. For example, SSO administrators spent considerable time over my entire data collection period lobbying the budget office for a base budget for the new small autonomous schools comparable with that of regular CPS schools. Also for example, early in implementation, participating schools, such as other CPS high schools, reported to a high school Area Administrative Officer (AIO), a central office administrator assigned to evaluate and support high school principals in a particular geographic region. CPS SSO administrators spent several years advocating for and eventually securing an AIO specifically for the new small autonomous schools. One of them explained in an interview that the AIOs were a main conduit through which various resources and legitimacy flowed but that because the small schools were spread across multiple AIOs who did not necessarily have specialized knowledge of those types of schools, the system actually underserved those schools; in their view, a dedicated AIO for the new small autonomous schools would help ensure that the participating schools actually received the types of supports the AIOs were supposed to provide to all schools but in ways appropriate to new small autonomous schools contexts.

CPS SSO administrators' policy and practice development also involved efforts to include the new small autonomous schools in new central office provisions that emerged for schools participating in other initiatives, especially Renaissance 2010, launched in 2004 to create 100 new schools by 2010. As one SSO administrator explained,

I have said to [the chief executive officer] whatever Ren10 schools are getting we should have at the small schools. Whatever the innovations are . . . we should have them. He said oh yeah, yeah oh absolutely yeah . . . did somebody say no?

At the time, this person went on to explain that the central office administrators charged with implementing that other initiative did not follow through with the CEO's promise but that "my instincts are keep talking to people, keep neck whipping people. It is not what you like, but it is the political maneuvering that helping these schools takes." Another SSO administrator reported analyzing "every single CPS policy" to limit the number (and therefore presumably the top-down regulatory constraints) that would apply to schools brought in under Renaissance 2010; this administrator explained his/her involvement in this effort in part as an attempt to ensure that the new rules applied to the new small autonomous schools already under way. Ultimately, the new small autonomous schools were included under the provisions of Renaissance 2010.

OUSD SSO administrators also worked to leverage policy and practice changes for the initiative overall. Some work in this area, including pursuing policy waivers and convening writing teams, yielded limited results. Other efforts to reform individual central office departments and to create new central office work practices did seem associated with new implementation supports.

To elaborate, early in implementation and my data collection, OUSD SSO administrators sought policy and practice changes through waiver processes which were short-term exemptions from various state, district, and union rules. For example, during that period, SSO administrators identified state laws as significant implementation barriers. Two of them investigated whether to seek "alternative school" status for the new small autonomous schools. This designation, conferred by the California Department of Education, allowed identified schools to receive waivers of state education laws per California Education Code Section 58500. However, SSO administrators never secured this status. Nor were the SSO administrators, working with the superintendent, successful in activating a provision in the teachers' union contract to protect new small autonomous schools from involuntary transfers of teachers into the new small autonomous schools, teachers who may not have shared the philosophy of the receiving school. One participating school secured a waiver from the district-mandated Open Court curriculum. However, that waiver came after what various school and central office staff members described as a cumbersome application process demanding a 40-page justification for the waiver to be in effect for only 1 year. Two school principals expressed concerns that they did not have the time or other resources for such a process each year.

Subsequently, OUSD's SSO administrators engaged in three other activities to create new policies and practices for the new small autonomous schools that would eventually apply to all schools. First, at least two SSO administrators spent a significant amount of time between 2001 and 2003 managing and otherwise participating in "writing teams." Writing teams, sparked and funded in part by Oakland's local arm of a national school reform support organization, aimed specifically to create new central office policies and practices that would enable the promised school autonomy. The teams included central office representatives, school principals, and,

occasionally, members of external school reform support organizations and focused on the domains in which the school board's new small autonomous schools policy promised schools autonomy. Reviews of meeting minutes and interviews confirmed that not all the groups met. The budget and human resources writing teams convened periodically with the SSO administrators as their main facilitators. One SSO administrator reported in interviews in both 2001 and 2002 that he/she spent virtually all his/her time on the work of these two writing teams. However, no respondents attributed the work of the writing teams with actual changes in central office policies or practices. Nor could I find any products generated by these teams beyond draft ideas circulated among team members.

OUSD SSO administrators also participated in reforms of individual central office departments as a strategy to enable implementation. For example, one SSO administrator reported and the director of facilities confirmed that he/she directly assisted the director of facilities with the development of a master plan for OUSD facilities. The administrator explained these efforts as a strategy to ensure that the new small autonomous schools "are at the table when the district is trying to figure out how schools get and share space." Another SSO administrator worked with finance and budget office staff members to create a new budgeting system for the district that facilitated the autonomies promised to the participating schools. This work mainly centered on the development of a pilot initiative to introduce site-based budgeting into the whole district.

A major line of policy and practice development for OUSD SSO staff members during the last year of my data collection involved substantially reforming the central office to support the new small autonomous schools. One SSO administrator reported that this effort involved "not trying to reform the one [central office] we have but actually rebuild it." Another SSO administrator confirmed that he/she was "working on district transformation to help make the small schools more effective." That administrator described and other interviews and documents confirmed that at least three SSO administrators, with guidance from the executive director of the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES), a school reform support organization, spent much of that year creating principles to guide the redesigned central office. They then identified point people in each department to support participating schools on the basis of those principles. Ideas from these early efforts eventually informed a blueprint for a wholesale central office reinvention effort (Oakland Unified School District, 2007).

School-by-school approaches to central office policy and practice development. SSO administrators in both districts also aimed to leverage central office policy and practice changes for individual schools. These school-by-school activities seemed to take up less of the SSO administrators' time in both districts than initiative-wide policy and practice development, and far less in CPS, but nonetheless constituted a significant part of their participation in implementation.

In CPS, SSO administrators reported and e-mail reviews confirmed that they responded to countless questions from participating principals each month. Most of these inquiries called for SSO administrators to provide basic information on how to operate a school building. When I probed for any examples of school-by-school policy and practice changes, they cited a few, most of which related to facilities or to curriculum and instruction. For example, one SSO administrator reported that a school had removed its teacher lunchroom to create a classroom but later decided that the lunchroom was desired. This person described bringing the issue to the head of CPS operations, but “she wasn’t really focused on that . . . so I finally brought in the person from [the] high school to meet with her directly. I . . . do a lot of that kind of match-making.” This person also explained that principals told him/her that it “was a big deal” that they “felt that they had an advocate in the central office. . . . There is a human element to knowing that someone will come out and advocate for them and listen to their problems.”

Other examples of school-by-school policy and practice development related to what one CPS SSO administrator called “protecting small schools’ curricular decisions.” The SSO had a dedicated academic affairs director, but many SSO administrators reported working on such issues. As one example of a curricular issue, an SSO administrator elaborated,

There are more complicated examples but here is a basic one. One of the schools wanted to bring their kids to the local library and there was some weird rule about not being able to walk students to places. . . . So that is something that we are fighting [another central office unit] about right now. We want them to be able to walk with their students to the local library to do this research project.

OUSD SSO administrators too engaged in school-by-school policy and practice development. For example, one central office administrator reported being in schools “probably three times a week . . . for a couple of hours every time.” This administrator went on to report,

I am their advocate so I update them on progress I have made with stuff that they are trying to figure out like this is . . . how your budget process works and this is . . . where we are with facilities or I need you to tell me what your facilities needs are so I can go and get them.

Another reported meeting with the superintendent

for five hours last week mostly around . . . the [new small autonomous] schools that are already open. . . . We had a help session . . . for several hours around the implementation plans that are about to be turned in and have another one of those tonight.

Interviews with school principals confirmed these accounts of SSO administrators’ school-by-school efforts. In a typical comment, one school principal said that one central office administrator “fights for [my school].”

Attempted but incomplete policy and practice development over time. I followed SSO administrators' attempts to affect policy and practice changes over time and found that in some key areas, despite significant investments of their time, they did not secure such changes. These examples tended to relate to changes that implicated multiple central office units and unions.

For instance, in CPS, the school board policy authorizing the new small autonomous schools initiative, dated April 24, 2002, defined a small high school as having "no more than 500 students created by converting an existing school into two or more small schools or by establishing new schools following a request for proposals" (Chicago School Board Resolution 02-0424-P003). Various respondents indicated that this enrollment limit stemmed in part from research that associated high schools of up to 400 to 500 students with student learning gains. However, the CPS budget system operated on assumptions that teachers had a student load of at least 140 students and that new positions should be generated for every 28 students. All respondents interviewed about this example indicated that these thresholds did not allow the participating schools, which aimed for fewer than 500 students (or around 25 students per position), to generate enough staff members to implement their school plans unless schools raised their enrollments to levels that, in the words of one, "blew the whole point" of the initiative. These budget specifications reflected in part central office human resources policy stemming from teachers' union agreements about teacher workload. Changes to these limits also affected other central office departments, such as facilities and demographics, whose resource allocation decisions also relied on the budget formula. Various respondents reported in the fall of 2004 that some central office staff members allowed schools to limit their enrollments as long as they did not discriminate against particular classes of students. Many of these respondents criticized these arrangements as tenuous because they were not codified into formal CPS policy.

Invisible to many of these respondents, SSO administrators were working with executive and budget office administrators to develop strategies for achieving the enrollment cap that the school board policy already promised. These strategies included revising the budget formula (which involved expensive, complex hardware, software, and personnel changes) and manipulating how data were entered into the formula to generate enough positions for participating schools within their own locally developed enrollment targets. At that time, they indicated that the results of their efforts would be written into a revision of the original school board policy, in the words of one, to give the original policy provision "some real teeth."

By late April 2005, 3 years after the original board policy called for enrollments of no more than 500 students and over a year after SSO administrators began building a firm 500-student enrollment cap into a revision of the school board policy, meeting minutes and internal memos confirmed that CPS executive leaders called for a school enrollment cap of 600 students to, in the words of one, "ensure that schools received the positions they needed." Meeting minutes indicated that during the spring of 2005, an SSO administrator who had

been working on the 500-student cap in the intervening 3-year period had begun to advocate for a 600-student cap. According to the meeting minutes, this person argued, "This is what this system can support."

In OUSD, SSO administrators and school principals developed a plan to issue purchasing cards to new small autonomous schools and a select group of other schools. According to multiple respondents and e-mails, this new system would help school principals avoid problems with the traditional centralized purchasing process, such as frequent delays and errors in securing materials, and otherwise help realize school autonomy over purchasing. At the outset of this effort in mid-2001, many respondents reported difficulty finding a vendor to issue a card to schools. Others reported that they had found a bank, but no one knew who had the authority to apply for the cards. An SSO administrator indicated that they participated in implementation by "asking [the purchasing department to issue the card]. I keep asking. That is one of my weekly questions."

Six months later, internal central office memos indicated that central office administrators in business services had drafted a handbook on how to use the card and would implement the card by July 1, 2002. In July, principals reported that they had not received handbooks, that their draft handbooks had many errors, that they had not received their cards, or that the credit cards they received had \$500 spending limits that rendered the card, in one principal's words, "almost completely useless." Central office purchasing staff members reported that they were looking for the right kind of card for schools. In an internal memo dated October 3, 2002, the superintendent signed off on a \$5,000 spending limit and directed the purchasing department to "have the cards out by Tuesday noon." By March 2003, some schools had not received their credit cards. Multiple e-mails and other memos from an SSO administrator to the director of purchasing urged him to finalize these processes. As he/she wrote in one, "I am running out of excuses." According to an administrator in purchasing, implementation stalled because schools did not pay their bills on time. Principals reported that the credit card company had sent their bills to the central office warehouse, where staff members reportedly kept them, unpaid, on their desks. One central office administrator argued that the SSO administrators did not understand that implementing the card demanded a level of school principals' readiness to manage their own budgets that, in his/her experience, OUSD principals lacked. Implementation also hinged on agreements with at least two unions—the teamsters, who represented the truck drivers who delivered supplies to schools, and the union representing the clerical staff members in the central office warehouse—and the retraining of central office and school staff members in budget, procurement, and technology. By May 2003, school principals had not received the cards, or their cards were suspended because of delinquent payments that they attributed to various billing errors. One SSO administrator summed up his/her experience with the card: "I could push push push and . . . [other people say] Okay yeah it's going to happen and then: nothing."

Capacity Building: Linking to Build Central Office Relationships and Knowledge for Future Policy and Practice Changes

SSO administrators' bridging activities also frequently involved efforts to build knowledge and relationships throughout the central office to help leverage future supportive policy and practice changes. CPS SSO administrators tended to build such knowledge by writing formal memos. Internal SSO documents confirmed that SSO administrators during my study period authored two or three formal memos each month that shared information about participating schools and proposals for revising central office policies and practices with the CEO, budget director, and other central office leaders.

Their bridging strategies also involved meetings aimed in part to increase AIOs' knowledge about the initiative. One SSO staff person described helping the AIOs have "epiphanies over small schools": realizations that these schools were their responsibility to support in ways appropriate with initiative goals. Another explained,

I definitely try to reach out to the AIOs, at least on a semester or quarterly basis, to at least keep them informed of what's going on at the schools and keep a line of communication going on. . . . So whenever we get a chance to get in there, we meet with them and give them reports of the work we are doing and try to get feedback and see what their needs are.

Another elaborated that he/she talked with AIOs about "academically everything. . . . I see them once a month at various meetings. . . . I might be in a particular principals' meeting with them when they are working with their principals to keep track of what is going on." All the AIOs interviewed for this study corroborated that they were in contact with SSO administrators "frequently" or "often," with one adding, especially considering that they have only one or two small schools in their area. Another elaborated, "We are e-mailing each other constantly."

Respondents in CPS indicated that routine information sharing was essential to avoid conflicts with other central office units that could derail their future efforts to advocate for policy and practice changes. As one explained,

Any time you step beyond the immediate control of your own unit . . . to an issue that also affects other units then there is the opportunity or the requirement to check with those others who are being effected and to see if they agree.

When I asked if that was a written requirement, the respondent said no but that he/she knew to do it,

because if you don't you will be called on it and you will be asked [usually by the CEO] did you check with so and so, how does he feel. . . . The successful manager within the Chicago Public Schools is the person who manages those relationships well.

Other evidence confirmed that CPS SSO administrators' bridging strategies also involved relationship building to increase central office readiness for future supportive policy and practice changes. As one described,

Your role is to build relationships with the other departments to get the things that we need. So they understand who we are, they understand who our schools are and that makes it easier to get services. I think all of us do that. All of us . . . try to build relationships.

In the words of another, they did not have positional authority to influence policy and practice development, but "I . . . rely on fostering relationships internally to kind of raise the attention of these schools to departments that need to service them."

CPS SSO administrators aimed to build such relationships in part by attending meetings in other central office units and otherwise supporting the work of those other units. For example, one SSO administrator recounted how he/she attended staff meetings of the accountability office, so when they begin revising their implementation strategy for No Child Left Behind, he/she would be "at the table" to shape how that strategy unfolded in service of the participating schools. Others described helping other central office administrators with other challenges, because "when I solve these little problems I create trust and then when I come to these other problems [related to the new small autonomous schools] they will trust me." One SSO administrator explained that as a result of such efforts, "we are now on their [other central office administrators'] radar. So they will come looking to us for questions and for clarification and just for input and updates and stuff like that." Another reported that because of such efforts, "I actually get a lot of calls from [other central] offices wondering which are the small schools, what are they." He/she elaborated that usually, these calls related to parts of school improvement strategies that did not fit the offices' standard operating procedures and how other central office administrators should "understand how small schools fit into the picture and how to help."

Despite these attempts at knowledge and relationship building, I did not find evidence in CPS that knowledge and relationships actually were strengthened. For example, AIOs generally reported that they already had substantial knowledge of all their schools, including their new small autonomous schools, and that while they received various unsolicited information from the SSO administrators, that information did not build their knowledge of participating schools.

OUSD SSO administrators worked to build knowledge and relationships with other central office administrators with positive results. Perhaps because their strategies tended to involve face-to-face encounters rather than memos and e-mails, their knowledge and relationship building strategies overlapped. For example, one SSO administrator reported that he/she routinely engaged in

building relationships which meant . . . meeting people in central and saying, "Okay I do this; these are the new small autonomous

schools.” And the people would say, “Oh yeah, that is what you guys are doing.” And then I would have to say, “Wait a minute; this is what *we* are doing *we* it is not a ‘you guys’”. This is why and this is how [we are implementing this initiative]. . . . You can let me know what you need from us so you can serve us better.”

OUSD SSO administrators’ knowledge- and relationship-building strategies also involved their participation in the work of other central office units. One reported that such strategies helped “fold the notion of supporting small schools into the core of others’ work.” Whereas CPS SSO administrators occasionally participated in other central office units’ projects, such participation in OUSD appeared as a central, routine bridging strategy. For example, one SSO administrator ran the superintendent’s cabinet, composed of all major department directors. When I asked how he/she had come into that work, the administrator reported,

By design. I knew if I [wanted] them [other central office administrators] working on the ground for the design of the schools . . . some things needed to happen with the assistant sups [superintendents]. They needed a connection to the work. They needed . . . to figure how does the [small schools initiative] work align with strategic planning.

Several SSO administrators explained that one of them worked with each major central office department “so that we would get to know and build relationships with one department.” As one person described these efforts,

The idea [we were advocating for in our engagement with individual departments] was that these guys [administrators in other central office departments] would be out working closely with schools to figure out what needed to change and then feeding that information back into the department in order to redesign [that department].

Unlike in CPS, evidence from OUSD suggested that SSO administrators did build central office knowledge and relationships in support of implementation. For example, two administrators outside the SSO confirmed that SSO administrators’ knowledge- and relationship-building efforts deepened their engagement in implementation. In the words of one,

The Office School Reform [the SSO] was really good. . . . They facilitated many meetings that we had. . . . there were about five meetings. . . . [An SSO administrator] was our person so she facilitated our meetings. . . . It was all visioning: how would your work look different? What would you do differently? . . . And the stakeholders who came on were asked to make a commitment to the [new small autonomous] schools and that felt really new for the principals too. . . . That when you [a school principal] call I will respond.

They went on to explain that through these processes, they came to understand that their work demanded that they understand “more what the school

really needed” and that they needed to be “willing to go outside their little defined job to get it.”

Other evidence confirmed that through these bridging strategies, other central office administrators came to know about and become invested in the implementation of the new small autonomous schools. For example, one SSO administrator reported that several of the participating school principals had fought for over a year for the autonomy to implement the curriculum they laid out in their school board–approved school plans but that deviated from the district’s centralized curricular mandates. After engaging with the participating schools in the meetings orchestrated by the SSO, one senior central office administrator indicated that if schools could show that they had curricula that were better than the districts’ mandated curricula, they would be allowed to use their own curricula. Another SSO administrator explained that their participation in efforts to reform central office departments “has worked in some cases then hardly made a dent in some other cases.” They attributed the difference to whether the particular department directors had opportunities to understand the initiative and

why small schools fit into the strategic plan so well. . . . So we got there by talking to department heads and . . . then we organized different meetings to have all those people together, training those people about what they were about and what their goals were and then getting them together in their cross-functional groups . . . that would service the school.

*Communicating Requirements: Linking to Influence
School Policies and Practices*

SSO central office administrators occasionally aimed to link schools and the rest of the central office to influence *schools’* policies and practices to bring schools into compliance with central office rules. SSO administrators often explained and demonstrated that they intended to increase school compliance in the short term while they worked to change policies and practices to support schools’ plans. For example, in CPS, an SSO administrator described and meeting minutes confirmed that one school did not use conventional letter grades and that its grading system was integral to its philosophy and improvement plans. An SSO administrator explained that with a consultant, they developed a system “to teach teachers how to translate their grading system into a system that matches the CPS system” rather than work to change the CPS grading system. When asked for their rationale for this implementation support strategy, two SSO administrators reported that the district grading requirements stemmed from state policies that, in the words of one, were “well beyond their wherewithal” to change.

Another CPS SSO administrator characterized relationships between the participating principals and central office administrators overseeing certain operations as “tense,” in part because the administrators viewed the principals as asking for allowances that they considered “way out of line,” even

when they linked directly to their board-approved improvement plans. This administrator described helping principals work within existing budget and purchasing rules, in his/her words,

So I would try and massage the situation . . . in a relationship-building way and I would call back that person at the school and say, "I think you should wait, be grateful, try and foster a relationship with [a central office administrator]. She has got 640 schools."

In OUSD, a school principal described how the school plan called for a school schedule that deviated from central office policy. This principal reported, "[An SSO administrator] had to run around and get us all the legal mandates and the paperwork to make sure we had the appropriate instructional minutes." Another school principal explained that "the district thing with us is as long as we stay within those state mandates we don't have any district mandates but since the district mandates were state mandates it was all kind of meaningless." Other examples suggest that SSO administrators worked with schools to comply with central office rules in the short term while they lobbied for policy and practice changes more supportive of individual school plans. For instance, as part of their professional development for participating schools during the third year of implementation, SSO administrators invited other central office staff members, in the words of one, "to define what the autonomies were, what was negotiable, what wasn't negotiable, and to come and provide information about the logistical stuff around starting a school and be available to answer questions." Another central office administrator described that these meetings focused on clarifying state and central office policies schools should follow:

I gave them some sample Ed. Code [state education law] and talked about attendance accounting, some things about revenue limits and some budget stuff, FTE, I gave them some general information that I thought that you would need as a new principal to help you understand how your revenue was derived. . . . The stuff that any principal should know.

SSO administrators explained these compliance-oriented presentations as a short-term strategy to help with implementation while they worked to build central office administrators' knowledge of and relationships with the initiative for future policy and practice changes.

Various evidence sources suggested that this strategy in fact built such knowledge and relationships. For example, all the central office administrators I interviewed about the small schools presentations reported that they were pleased to have made these presentations. As one explained, such professional development for principals is "what I do," and before the presentations, he/she did not have opportunities to work with participating schools in the ways he/she thought he/she was supposed to. In general, these respondents reported that their knowledge about the participating schools was high, especially relative to the previous year. Several reported

that as a result, they had developed new ways to manage their own offices to increase their responsiveness to participating schools.

Evidence from CPS likewise suggested that, at least occasionally, the SSO administrators aimed to increase schools' compliance with central office policy to help schools, in the words of one SSO administrator, "just get their doors open and get going" while they advocated for central office policy and practice changes. In the enrollment cap example above, SSO administrators had schools adhere to enrollment caps significantly higher than they wanted while they lobbied internally for the lower enrollment cap. Another CPS SSO administrator described working with multiple schools on special education requirements: "I am sort-of like an informer of what this situation may be of what they have to conform to." This administrator explained that absent formal district policy specifying the schools' autonomy, he/she helped schools comply with the current system, especially when their plans for innovating created conflict with the AIOs:

So here you have this innovative [school] program and the AIO looks around and says this is totally whacked. So there is a conflict between the principal . . . and what is expected and . . . I see where the principal is and I see where the AIO is and I try to fill the gap. I will say to the principal, Okay in actuality you are sitting in a situation where you . . . think you have autonomies and in actuality there is nothing written. . . . The autonomies have not been spelled out. There is a policy but it has not been signed as a contract.

He/she went on to explain that they filled gaps by helping schools comply with existing rules while they also worked to convince the AIO of the value of the program.

Buffering

Consistent with my conceptual framework, I found some evidence that SSO administrators in both districts buffered or limited the contact between participating schools and others in the central office, especially around the extent to which other central office administrators inspected or otherwise intervened with schools. The first type of buffering, school-level assistance, seems consistent with resource-based buffering, since it involved the provision of resources, beyond those available to other schools, to enable implementation. Per my conceptual framework, all the examples below seem to reflect institutional buffering in that they may have increased the perception of other central office administrators that participating schools were supported and were otherwise on a trajectory toward improving their performance, thereby limiting the likelihood of central office intervention, at least in the short term.

In CPS, such assistance often focused on resolving conflicts that arose among school principals sharing school campuses. For example, the design of the CPS new small autonomous schools initiative mainly involved the conversion of large high schools into smaller autonomous schools sharing the same campus. SSO administrators, AIOs, school principals, and school support providers alike reported that conflicts “frequently” or “often” arose among the multiple school principals who shared campuses over what one referred to as “shared stuff,” such as building security, staffing, libraries, and sports teams. One central office administrator explained that these school-level “relationship issues” threatened to create a “really negative feeling between CPS [the central office], especially the AIOs, and these schools. [These were] really contentious issues.” To address these challenges, SSO administrators and others created a position of “campus manager” that they piloted during the 2004–2005 academic year. SSO administrators explained that the campus manager resolved conflicts at school sites and helped mitigate negative perceptions of these schools among other central office administrators and their intervention in these schools.

For example, an SSO administrator explained that three principals at one school campus disagreed about which programs should use particular shared space on their campus. The campus manager in conjunction with SSO administrators developed options for use of the space and facilitated a process for the principals to choose among the options. Although high school programs were implicated in this example, staff members in the Office of High School Programs reported that they did not become involved because the schools seemed to be coming up with, in the words of one, “some new options we hadn’t thought of,” and that seemed promising. An SSO administrator indicated that that central office unit typically operated on assumptions that each campus housed only one school and that the involvement of that office would likely have involved strategies to limit the ability of the multiple schools to execute their own programs.

During my study period, accountability policies called for significant district intervention in schools with limited academic gains. In this context, I considered SSO administrators’ efforts to coach schools in improving academic achievement as a buffering strategy in that such efforts promised to mitigate broader central office inspection and involvement with those schools. In CPS, multiple SSO administrators reported that an SSO administrator dedicated to academic affairs coached school sites on their academic programs. According to documents, “the Academic Affairs Director is currently working one-on-one with schools to review freshmen course failure patterns and to implement strategies to get these freshmen back on track. PSAE [Prairie State Achievement Examination] prep work is also being reviewed.” One respondent captured several respondents’ comments when he/she reported, “[This person] doesn’t supervise the principals so [he/she] can really be a support to them.” Several respondents criticized the SSO for its lack of focus on teaching and learning. However, they generally

acknowledged that the academic affairs officer, in the words of one, “had helped address some of the teaching and learning issues—to the extent that they could with [the] ‘district lens.’ . . . But [that person’s] efforts probably mitigated a lot of what other schools deal with [i.e., central office intervention].” Later in implementation, CPS appointed an AIO to work exclusively with the new small autonomous schools. Various SSO administrators framed the small schools AIO as a key strategy for strengthening school assistance for teaching and learning and helping the schools avoid, in the words of one SSO administrator, “some of the confusion and just the problems that come from [central office administrators] just not getting it . . . [about the participating schools].”

In OUSD, early in implementation, school principals’ and SSO administrators’ reports conflicted regarding the SSO’s coaching assistance to schools. For example, one SSO administrator commented, “I influence the instructional practice in the classroom through helping and supporting principals in providing support to teachers.” But principals generally reported that they often requested such support from the SSO but that the SSO administrators did not provide it. One school principal reported, “I have said we have been open for three months and we could have been doing absolutely nothing for all [the SSO administrators] know.”

Over time, principals reported and documents confirmed that the head of the SSO frequently coached school principals in improving teaching and learning. As one principal described this work, “[The work involved] a lot of coaching . . . a lot of very rich discussions.” During this later implementation period, the principals reported directly to the superintendent. When asked about the focus of their regular meetings, principals generally commented, in the words of one, “Mostly . . . my personal growth. He pushes you.” Principals typically reflected that their direct contact with the superintendent helped them avoid, in the words of one, “someone coming in suddenly and saying ‘Why are you doing that?’ or ‘You need to work with [a school-support organization]’ when none of those providers gets what we are trying to do.”

Absorbing Potential and Actual Scrutiny

SSO administrators also buffered schools by inserting themselves between the rest of the central office and schools to direct any scrutiny to them rather than the schools. For example, in CPS, two SSO administrators described how a school developed an application process for students interested in attending the school that some in the school and community felt violated the new small autonomous schools policy that participating schools be “open enrollment.” The school principal told an SSO administrator that they were not excluding students on the basis of test scores or other criteria that clearly violated central office policy; rather, they asked students to write a brief paragraph to help school administrators gauge whether the students were a good fit for the school’s particular philosophy. An SSO administrator subsequently wrote a memo to all the participating principals that at an upcoming principals’ meeting, they would jointly negotiate principles on

which the schools would base their enrollment processes. The administrator reported in an interview that the principles would become SSO policy and that he/she would run the decision by the AIOs and executive staff members not for permission but as a “notice-of-disclosure-and-then-proceed” process. The administrator explained that other central office administrators might disagree with this approach to enrollment but that such disagreement would then become a matter of negotiation between the SSO and other central office units while the participating schools operated, in his/her words, under a central office “policy of a sort.”

In OUSD, SSO administrators frequently engaged in such buffering strategies to enable implementation. In one instance, an SSO administrator described one school that wanted to open as an “innovative school organized around internships with kids working on their own individualized learning plans” and low teacher-to-student ratios. The superintendent wanted “to pull” this school because he did not think its planning process had provided a sufficient foundation for success. The SSO administrator argued that the school had adequate curricular plans and other structures in place and that he/she would take personal responsibility for supporting the school. The superintendent reportedly responded, “If it is a mess then it is on your head because I’m not authorizing it.” Later in implementation the SSO administrator reported, “I was . . . there yesterday at their exhibits . . . and they are doing great . . . and now I am fighting for next year so they can move and grow their school . . . until we get our shin kicked.”

Also for example, early in implementation, OUSD policy did not elaborate a process by which a teacher could transfer out of a regular school and into a new small autonomous school. SSO administrators reported that staff of the human resources department typically moved teachers according to long-standing central office and union rules based on teacher tenure. However, one SSO administrator reported that it

made sense . . . that anyone who participated in designing a school should be able to transfer into a school they had helped create. . . . I just made that decision. . . . I checked it with HR [human resources] and said look this is what is going to happen, this is what I think should happen, is there any reason why it shouldn’t. . . . There is nothing illegal about it? No, there isn’t? Okay fine. . . . So far, as long as there is a teacher that in on the design team, then they automatically get transferred [to the school they helped design].

This administrator reported that subsequently, managers in human resources would call him/her about issues related to participating schools’ teacher assignments and that in this way, the administrator “spared” schools from these kinds of negotiations and potential conflict with the managers.

New Institutional Conditions for New Institutional Work

What conditions seemed associated with (a) SSO administrators' engagement in these work practices across both districts and (b) differences between the two districts in terms of the extent to which SSO administrators engaged in these work practices and achieved other outcomes? Regarding the latter, why did OUSD and CPS differ in the extent to which attempted policy and practice changes and knowledge and relationship building seemed to actually result in those outcomes, and why did school-level assistance seem relatively less frequent in OUSD compared with CPS? The framing of my study called my attention to how institutional dimensions of SSO administrators' work contexts might help account for these trends. While a full exploration of the context of SSO administrators' work is beyond the scope of this article, several institutional conditions seemed associated with the patterns above.

For one, the SSO administrators themselves typically were nontraditional central office employees in new central office positions. The hiring of staff members from backgrounds not traditionally represented in school district central offices into positions without an institutional history can fuel organizational change (Honig, 2006). Through this strategy, central offices may introduce new professional scripts or ways of operating into their workplaces that help the central offices manage nonroutine implementation challenges over time. When these individuals have limited investments in central office careers, they may be particularly open to the risk taking involved in the new work practices. In partial support of this argument about the value of SSO administrators' limited or nontraditional central office experience in the present case, CPS SSO administrators generally were not longtime CPS employees. Many were lawyers hired from private firms and advocacy organizations or relatively young staff members with some small schools experience in other settings. Likewise, in OUSD, SSO staff members included a former charter school organizer, several former business consultants, and community organizers. In interviews, SSO administrators in both districts reported that they had strong investments in their present work but that in the next 5 to 10 years, they did not expect to be school system employees. Perhaps their professional backgrounds and limited investments in central office careers helped fuel their engagement in the kinds of bridging and buffering I uncovered in my analysis. Then what might account for differences across the two districts in terms of SSO administrators' engagement in these work practices and attendant outcomes?

These SSO administrators operated in broader ecologies of implementation supports, including their superintendent or CEO and external organizations. Differences in these ecologies may account for variations in central office administrators' engagement in bridging and buffering. To elaborate, with remarkable consensus, all respondents identified their superintendent or CEO as longtime champions of new small autonomous schools and stated that the initiatives were high priorities for those persons. However, these chief officers differed in their actual engagement in implementation. For example, after the first year of implementation, the OUSD superintendent

took on direct supervision of participating principals, a responsibility that formerly rested with the director of the SSO. Such an arrangement could have confused or threatened the authority and scope of work of the SSO director and staff. In this case, SSO administrators reported that it actually mitigated principals' frustrations with not having access to someone with the capacity to support their own instructional leadership. Principals reported that these meetings were "extremely helpful" and "inspiring"; one explained, "They [the meetings] push me; I'm better for it." The SSO director and two other SSO administrators specifically reported that this arrangement freed them up for other work related to building central office policies, practices, and capacity for implementation.

By contrast, the CPS CEO's participation in implementation in some respects may have threatened the legitimacy of SSO administrators and at least occasionally dampened their bridging and buffering activities. For example, the CPS CEO routinely appointed people to formal positions overseeing policy development for the new small autonomous schools. During my period of study, none of these people came from the SSO, and they all reported directly to the CEO's office and otherwise operated independently of the SSO. Several respondents reported that they viewed those hired as political appointees with close ties to the mayor. On average, these people spent fewer than 6 months in their posts. These positions created some confusion and conflict regarding SSO administrators' participation in implementation. For instance, some suggested that one SSO administrator left the district after the CEO promised him/her formal responsibility for policy development related to the new small autonomous schools and shortly thereafter gave that responsibility to someone new to the district who would report directly to the CEO. CPS SSO administrators spent considerable time negotiating with executive-level administrators about the organization, supervision, and scope of work of their office, time that likely took away from bridging and buffering. During the 3 years of my study, the SSO formally reorganized at least five times.

The two districts also differed in terms of the participation of external organizations: these organizations seemed to enable SSO administrators' work in OUSD but not in CPS.⁷ In OUSD, three organizations provided various resources that likely freed up SSO administrators for bridging and buffering and lessened the need for them to engage in the form of buffering that involved school coaching. The Oakland Community Organization (OCO) and BayCES had a formal agreement with OUSD to support implementation. OCO specialized in community organizing, especially in low-income neighborhoods, to build support and community capacity for new small autonomous schools. BayCES developed and operated an incubator process to help teams of teachers and others establish and implement new small autonomous schools. Many Oakland respondents attributed OCO's community organizing and the BayCES incubator with substantial support for implementation that might have otherwise fallen to the SSO or gone unaddressed. The BayCES executive director spearheaded an effort to redesign central office units and eventually the central

office overall to support new small autonomous schools. Several SSO administrators reported using the emerging plan to guide their efforts to help reform individual central office units. A former BayCES staff person became an SSO administrator and oversaw early efforts to convert large comprehensive high schools into new small autonomous schools. In these ways, BayCES supported SSO administrators' work in part by taking on that work themselves.

The Oakland Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform provided various resources directly to central office administrators to support their engagement in implementation. For example, they connected administrators in the SSO and other central office units with new small autonomous school principals, teachers, and other leaders from other districts. Interviews, direct observations, and document reviews confirmed that these leaders provided guides for school designs and for central office policies and practices that promised to support implementation such as a model of school site-based budgeting. They supported the superintendent of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, nationally known for increasing school autonomy through central office redesign, in providing direct consulting for the OUSD superintendent and others around the development of new central office systems to support the new small autonomous schools. The superintendent commented publicly and in interviews that the Edmonton superintendent deepened his thinking about central office strategies to enable implementation.

By contrast, in CPS, external organizations did not seem to participate in implementation in ways that obviously lessened the demands on or enhanced the resources available to SSO administrators. These results could be a function of the sheer size of CPS, which could have diffused the efforts of any one external support provider. These results also seemed to stem from how actors internal and external to CPS chose to participate in implementation. For instance, various organizing groups and consultants worked with schools throughout the city on the implementation of their school plans, but these supports seemed trained largely at individual schools rather than the central office. Such school-level supports seemed particularly important to implementation in CPS, where, by many accounts, the first schools selected for participation were chosen on the basis of their high needs rather than their readiness for implementation. However, several community organizations frequently appeared in local media and elsewhere as outspoken critics of the central office rather than as their implementation partners, raising questions about them as a source of support to SSO administrators in particular.

Another external organization, the Chicago High School Redesign Initiative (CHSRI), convened a board and staff specifically to enable implementation, in part by serving as the fiscal agent for private philanthropic investments in implementation. Several respondents reflected that the CHSRI board included, in the words of one, "as influential a group as you can get" in Chicago education, including high-level program officers from local and national foundations and CPS executive staff members. Various respondents reported that in general, the CHSRI board lent legitimacy to the initiative and likely focused CPS executive staff members on the participating schools to a degree that might

not otherwise have been possible. My review of CHSRI meeting notes confirmed that almost all of their meetings involved lengthy updates on school progress. Almost all respondents attributed the CHSRI-commissioned evaluation of the initiative with leveraging the appointment of the AIO for the new small autonomous schools and otherwise generating evidence to inform central office implementation decisions.

On the flipside, several central office respondents expressed confusion about why the CHSRI board did not do more to help their specific implementation support efforts. In the words of one, "I turned to them many times [for implementation assistance]. Call [the CEO]. Write a letter. [But they didn't.]" Several CHSRI board members reported in interviews that they realized over time that they had not structured their board meetings in ways that enabled their follow-up and action on various discussions that could have helped implementation. Individual SSO administrators may have been more hampered than helped by the board. For example, one explained that when he/she submitted requests to the CPS budget office for funding for the new small autonomous schools, on several occasions, budget staff members responded by denying those requests on the grounds that they believed the CHSRI board should have covered the costs. Interviews with three different respondents inside and outside CPS indicated that a CPS central office administrator was instructed by a CHSRI board member not to speak so much at CHSRI board meetings despite the fact that he/she was frequently the only person from CPS in attendance and that he/she arguably was among the CPS central office administrators most knowledgeable about and involved with implementation. As one SSO administrator described the participation of the CHSRI board in implementation, "They could have been a major boost to our work but even though we were the staff on this they were operating on a totally different cloud."

Conclusions

This research stemmed from the premise that new small autonomous schools initiatives rest on various bodies of evidence that suggest these initiatives hold promise for realizing learning improvements for all students, especially in low-income urban neighborhoods; however, research on these initiatives and their policy antecedents suggest that they have faltered in implementation in part because of urban district central offices' participation in implementation. Accordingly, the aim of this study was to understand how central offices might enable implementation.

The findings reinforce the argument above that to date, treatments of "districts" in studies of new small autonomous schools have been far too unidimensional and incomplete. Such treatments have cast central offices as relatively monolithic, impersonal curbs on implementation based largely on school reports of central office activities. By contrast, central office administrators in this study engaged in particular activities that seemed to support implementation. Even examples of disappointing outcomes such as those related to the CPS enrollment

policy and OUSD credit card, when examined over a series of years, represent extended attempts by SSO administrators to leverage significant changes in the central office and thus their sustained engagement in nontraditional and potentially supportive forms of central office participation.

The findings confirm the study's conceptual framework, which suggests that central office participation in implementation involves activities consistent with "bridging" and "buffering." Both activities seemed important to implementation, supporting the premise that enabling implementation involves both changing central office policies and practices and helping schools work ably and strategically within existing policies and practices. Bridging and buffering in this policy and institutional context took particular forms: bridging included policy and practice development, capacity building, and the communication of requirements; buffering entailed providing school-level assistance and absorbing potential and actual scrutiny for schools.

Particular conditions seemed to make bridging and buffering more or less possible and productive. First, the findings of this study reveal how new central office employees in new, specialized boundary-spanning units of public bureaucracies may function as change agents in the context of policy initiatives that call on such institutions to engage in nonroutine bureaucratic work. In my previous studies and some of the research undergirding this study's conceptual framework, boundary spanners' limited experience with their home organization (in this case, the central office) can curb their engagement in the activities described here (Honig, 2006). In the present case, SSO administrators' limited central office experience in and of itself does not seem to have been a hindrance to their participation. In fact, their experience with complex organizational change efforts in other sectors and limited investments in central office careers may have buoyed their participation.

Rather, features of the broader context in which the SSO administrators worked, including the participation of their superintendents and external organizations, seemed to matter substantially to their participation in implementation and the results of their participation. These findings highlight that boundary spanners, like some other change agents, are fundamentally dependent on others to realize particular outcomes. This observation might lead some to suggest that SSO administrators in this case would have benefited from more line authority over other central office administrators to realize their goals. However, this study's findings do not bear that out. For example, the OUSD purchasing department's failure to respond to a directive from the superintendent raises serious questions about the relative value of line authority as an influence on the participation of other central office administrators. In this view, the SSO administrators' capacity-building strategies—their efforts to build the knowledge of and their relationships to other central office administrators—seem particularly promising as levers of central office change. The quotations above from CPS SSO administrators in particular suggest that perhaps because the SSO administrators lacked formal line authority, they may have been more likely than they otherwise would have been to pursue such strategies.

These examples also reveal the limited power of formal board policy for supporting central office administrators' participation in implementation. In both districts, school board policy authorized the launch of the new small autonomous schools initiatives and called for various provisions such as school autonomy in particular areas. Despite these policy provisions, SSO administrators spent considerable time trying to actually secure the provisions their school board policies already had promised. Various scholars highlight from an institutional perspective how elected bodies routinely leave policy provisions unspecified, especially when it comes the redistribution of resources to traditionally disadvantaged groups or otherwise creating policy "winners" and "losers" (Malen, 2006; Schneider & Ingram, 1990). These findings underscore a major theme of my findings: that implementation hinges not mainly on the development of better formal policies but on investments in people within central offices to engage in new work practices.

This study raises a number of questions that might productively ground future investigations into central offices as bureaucratic institutions and how their members participate in complex change efforts. Among them, are bridging and buffering always important for enabling implementation, or are these activities more or less necessary in some bureaucratic institutional contexts? CPS and OUSD represented cases with very different starting capacity for various central office functions, and bridging and buffering appeared productive in both contexts, suggesting that the findings about bridging and buffering might hold in other contexts. Future research might explore that proposition with an eye toward developing deeper knowledge about how dimensions of institutional context matter to implementation.

Future research might also explore how central office administrators manage policy and practice changes (a form of bridging) that sit at the intersection of multiple central office systems. As noted above, policy and practice development appeared particularly challenging, as in the case of CPS school enrollment policy and the OUSD credit card, when changes in one central office unit required or implicated changes in other units. Future examinations should aim to uncover how significant interdependence among bureaucratic units and people in those units shapes their participation in challenging change initiatives.

These cases also highlight the importance of focusing educational research on institutional dynamics between district central office bureaucracies, schools, and the broader ecology of implementation supports in which they both sit. Such a focus demands that researchers develop data collection and analysis strategies that promise to reveal these dynamics. Overall, these findings and suggestions for further inquiry amplify the importance of moving beyond impersonal references to "districts" as actors and toward uncovering the human dimensions of district central offices as public bureaucratic institutions.

Notes

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¹In a previous implementation study, I argued that bridging and buffering activities were largely political activities distinct from the information and evidence management activities described here (Honig, 2006). In the context of the literature on innovation, such information management activities appear as a form of bridging.

²For example, the 2002 Oakland school board policy authorizing the new small autonomous schools initiative indicated, "Each NSA [new small autonomous] school must create its own vision and philosophy. Some may emphasize traditional approaches to education, while others are more progressive, emphasizing community issues such as multiculturalism and social justice" (Oakland Unified School District, 2000). The policy frequently cites the central office as a main implementation support. Likewise, in an internal memo in 2002, one CPS staff person wrote that the initiative focuses on "transforming the way CPS does high schools. The Initiative is not just about conversions of existing high schools. It is about learning how to do high school differently." Another CPS central office administrator centrally involved in implementation reported, "The initiative is a tugboat butting through the ice of an old [central office] system and showing the way of a new system."

³The implementation of these initiatives continues in both districts, and their current status may not be reflected in the findings reported here.

⁴For a report on the implementation start-up period, see Honig (2009).

⁵Because startup activities were such a significant arena of work for the SSO administrators, I elaborate on them in a separate paper. These activities included, in CPS, setting up transitional advisory councils to oversee individual school design and implementation and issuing request-for-proposal processes each year, which were particularly labor intensive because they were tailored and issued to individual school campuses rather than districtwide.

⁶A significant amount of initiative-wide policy development in both districts involved establishing basic policies and procedures for the opening of schools, such as securing unit numbers for the small schools in CPS so that schools could have independent budgets and otherwise be recognized by CPS people and systems as independent schools. Because these issues relate to basic startup and not ongoing implementation, I report on them in my paper on startup issues.

⁷For a fuller elaboration of the participation of these external organizations in implementation, please see (Honig, in press).

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