

STUDENTS AT THE CENTER

TEACHING AND LEARNING
IN THE ERA OF THE COMMON CORE

A JOBS FOR THE FUTURE PROJECT

CHANGING SCHOOL DISTRICT PRACTICES

MARCH 2012

THE STUDENTS AT THE CENTER SERIES

By Ben Levin, Amanda Datnow, and Nathalie Carrier

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDENTS AT THE CENTER SERIES

Students at the Center explores the role that student-centered approaches can play to deepen learning and prepare young people to meet the demands and engage the opportunities of the 21st century. *Students at the Center* synthesizes existing research on key components of student-centered approaches to learning. The papers that launch this project renew attention to the importance of engaging each student in acquiring the skills, knowledge, and expertise needed for success in college and a career. Student-centered approaches to learning, while recognizing that learning is a social activity, pay particular attention to the importance of customizing education to respond to each student's needs and interests, making use of new tools for doing so.

The broad application of student-centered approaches to learning has much in common with other education reform movements including closing the achievement gaps and providing equitable access to a high-quality education, especially for underserved youth. Student-centered approaches also align with emerging work to attain the promise and meet the demands of the Common Core State Standards.

However, critical and distinct elements of student-centered approaches to learning challenge the current schooling and education paradigm:

- > Embracing the student's experience and learning theory as the starting point of education;
- > Harnessing the full range of learning experiences at all times of the day, week, and year;
- > Expanding and reshaping the role of the educator; and
- > Determining progression based upon mastery.

Despite growing interest in student-centered approaches to learning, educators have few places to which they can turn for a comprehensive accounting of the key components of this emerging field. With funding from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, Jobs for the Future asked nine noted research teams to synthesize existing research in order to build the knowledge base for student-centered approaches to learning and make the findings more widely available.

The topic of this paper, as with each in the series, was selected to foster a deeper, more cohesive, research-based understanding of one or more core elements of student-centered approaches to learning. The authors in this series: synthesize and analyze existing research in their areas; identify what is known and where gaps remain related to student-centered approaches to learning; and discuss implications, opportunities, and challenges for education stakeholders who put students at the center. The authors were asked to consider the above definition of student-centered approaches, but were also encouraged to add, subtract, or critique it as they wished.

The authors were not asked explicitly to address the Common Core State Standards. Nevertheless, the research proceeded as discussions of the Common Core were unfolding, and several papers draw connections with that work. The thinking, learning, and teaching required for all students to reach the promised outcomes of the Common Core provide a backdrop for this project. The introductory essay looks across this paper and its companion pieces to lift up the key findings and implications for a new phase in the country's quest to raise achievement levels for all young people.

The nine research papers are loosely organized around three major areas of inquiry—learning theory; applying student-centered approaches; and scaling student-centered learning—although many of the papers necessarily cross more than one area:

- 1. LEARNING THEORY:** What does foundational and emerging research, particularly in the cognitive and behavioral sciences, tell us about how students learn and about what motivates them to learn?

Mind, Brain, and Education

Christina Hinton, Kurt W. Fischer, Catherine Glennon

Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice

Eric Toshalis, Michael J. Nakkula

2. APPLYING STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACHES: How are student-centered approaches to learning implemented? What is the nature of teaching in student-centered learning environments? How can students who are underrepresented in postsecondary education be engaged earlier and perform well in the math and reading activities that scaffold learning? How are advances in technology customizing curriculum and changing modes of learning to meet the needs of each student?

Teachers at Work—Six Exemplars of Everyday Practice

Barbara Cervone, Kathleen Cushman

Literacy Practices for African-American Male Adolescents

Alfred W. Tatum

Latino/a and Black Students and Mathematics

Rochelle Gutierrez, Sonya E. Irving

Curricular Opportunities in the Digital Age

David H. Rose, Jenna W. Gravel

3. SCALING UP STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACHES TO LEARNING: How have schools sought to increase personalization and with what outcomes for learning? What is the relationship between assessment and student-centered approaches? What can districts do to support student-centered approaches to learning?

Personalization in Schools

Susan Yonezawa, Larry McClure, Makeba Jones

Assessing Learning

Heidi Andrade, Kristen Huff, Georgia Brooke

Changing School District Practices

Ben Levin, Amanda Datnow, Nathalie Carrier

A number of distinguished researchers and practitioners serve as advisors to *Students at the Center* including Scott Evenbeck, founding president of the New Community College, City University of New York; Charles Fadel, Visiting Scholar, Harvard Graduate School of Education, MIT ESG/IAP, and Wharton/Penn CLO; Ronald Ferguson, Senior Lecturer in Education and Public Policy, Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Harvard Kennedy School; Louis Gomez, Professor and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Chair in Digital Media and Learning, Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, UCLA; Susan Moore Johnson, Professor and the Jerome T. Murphy Professor of Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education; Jim Liebman, Simon H. Rifkind Professor of Law, Columbia University School of Law; Miren Uriarte, Professor, College of Public and Community Service, University of Massachusetts, Boston; and Arthur VanderVeen, Vice President, Business Strategy and Development at Compass Learning.

To download the papers, introductory essay, executive summaries, and additional resources, please visit the project website: www.studentsatthecenter.org.

Over the coming months, Jobs for the Future and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation will craft opportunities to engage a broad audience in the conversation sparked by these papers. We look forward to building a shared understanding and language with you for this important undertaking.



Nancy Hoffman, Adria Steinberg, Rebecca Wolfe

Jobs for the Future



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The **Nellie Mae Education Foundation** is the largest charitable organization in New England that focuses exclusively on education. The Foundation supports the promotion and integration of student-centered approaches to learning at the middle and high school levels across New England. To elevate student-centered approaches, the Foundation utilizes a strategy that focuses on: developing and enhancing models of practice; reshaping education policies; increasing the body of evidenced-based knowledge about student-centered approaches and increasing public understanding and demand for high-quality educational experiences. The Foundation's initiative and strategy areas are: District Level Systems Change; State Level Systems Change; Research and Development; and Public Understanding. Since 1998, the Foundation has distributed over \$110 million in grants.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ben Levin, Ph.D., is a professor and Canada Research Chair in Education Leadership and Policy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. He spends his career half as an academic and half as a senior civil servant. His current interests are in large-scale change, poverty and inequity, and finding better ways to connect research to policy and practice in education.

Amanda Datnow, Ph.D., is a professor and chair of the Department of Education Studies at the University of California, San Diego. Her goals are to both improve policy and practice in education and advance theory about educational change. She is author or editor of six books and over 60 articles and book chapters. She serves on the editorial boards of several journals and consults for numerous professional organizations and government agencies.

Nathalie Carrier, M.A., M.Ed., is a doctoral candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. She is a graduate of an alternative, student-centered high school.

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INTRODUCTION



Our big issue is: How do we get our students to become active participants in their own learning?"

—Superintendent, urban school district

Schools in the United States struggle with the challenge of how to help all students learn what they need in order to graduate and go on to college or a good job. Although many reforms have focused on school choice, structures, or accountability mechanisms, there is also growing interest in effective teaching and learning practices in secondary schools (Levin 2011). In particular, interest is growing in how schools can put student needs, motivations, and interests at the center of their work.

As interest in student-centered learning grows, so do the definitions of what student-centered learning is. In a student-centered environment, we would expect to see students taking greater responsibility for setting goals for their own learning, activities that promote discovery of knowledge, and the teacher functioning more frequently in the role of facilitator than of driver (O'Neill & McMahon 2005). Activities

and assessment methods would have to change accordingly. While there is evidence of these practices in some schools and classrooms, it is clear that student-centered learning approaches are not the predominant approaches to teaching and learning in the United States today (National Research Council 2003). Yet traditional, teacher-directed approaches do not appear to be working well for many students as evidenced by numerous indicators, especially of students from racial minority and low-income backgrounds.

We examine the role of school districts in this work because today, and for the foreseeable future, most schools in the United States will be organized in and through districts. Districts "continue to function as the dominant local governance structure for U.S. schooling" (Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich 2008, p. 210). Whether one sees districts as the bureaucratic



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barriers to innovation and reform or, as we do, as important mid-level organizations that have the potential to foster and support good practice in education, districts will play an important role in any effort to extend the principles of student-centered learning. They are responsible for hiring and assigning teachers and principals, making decisions about the location of school programs, managing facilities, assigning students to schools, and managing a large share of the budget of schools. They have an important role in setting the culture and priorities of schools. They are also the connection between communities and their schools. For better or worse, their work matters a great deal.

Nevertheless, until fairly recently, districts were dismissed as a significant player in educational reform. As Andrea K. Rorrer et al. (2008) state, many scholars have argued that individual schools should be the locus of change, and that districts should simply get out of the way. However the idea that a system of independent schools can itself lead to high levels of student achievement does not have very much empirical support; most high-achieving countries have a very powerful national approach, a strong regional level approach, or both (Mourshed, Chijoki, & Barber 2010). Based on a synthesis of research on districts over the past 20 years, Rorrer et al. (2008) argue that the district is a key institutional actor in educational reform, providing instructional leadership, reorienting the organization, establishing policy coherence, and maintaining an equity focus. The equity focus is a particularly important role to underscore. The authors argue that districts serve a critical purpose in prioritizing equity as a collective value and providing flexibility to help schools achieve equitable outcomes, while holding them accountable for results. It is this delicate balance of loose and tight coupling that districts are uniquely situated to provide for schools.

To say that districts can play this role is not to imply that all districts do. In this paper, we stress the positive potential of school districts, but we also recognize that districts do not always embody these potentials, and that there are many examples of places and times in which district cultures and practices are powerful obstacles to improvement. Nor do we underestimate the challenges in changing districts to work more consistently with the principles in this series. Our argument is not that districts are necessarily leaders in this movement, but that without the active support of districts, student-centered learning practices will remain a marginal activity in U.S. education.

What would it take to move districts toward student-centered learning? Supporting this innovation would require considerable shifts in policy and practice on the part of districts and schools. Student-centered learning presumably challenges existing ways that schools and classrooms operate and teachers and students behave. It likely requires changes in pedagogical practice, the nature of student-teacher relations, and existing structures and cultures. Implementing such practices can be difficult as they often collide with broader systemic rules and regulations at the state and national levels (e.g., accountability and testing requirements; graduation requirements; financing; collective bargaining agreements). Moreover, some of these practices are quite inconsistent with dominant belief systems and historical practices in schools, and thus the changes are ideological as well as practical. Implementing a set of student-centered practices, therefore, would require system alignment at these levels, as well as the mobilization of political and community support.

Related Paper in the *Students at the Center* Series¹

For more on teaching practices in the context of student-centered learning approaches, see *Teachers at Work—Six Exemplars of Everyday Practice*, by Barbara Cervone and Kathleen Cushman.



The district is a key institutional actor in educational reform, providing instructional leadership, reorienting the organization, establishing policy coherence, and maintaining an equity focus.

Research on student-centered learning also notes several practical challenges that generally arise with the implementation of any educational reform effort. First, a major change in approach will likely require resources for implementation, such as for the professional development of educators or the development of new materials or changed organizational structures (Geven & Santa 2010). Second, challenges may arise when teachers' belief systems about teaching and learning do not cohere well with the tenets of student-centered learning or when teachers do not share a common definition of student-centered learning (Pederson & Liu 2003; O'Neill & McMahon 2005). Finally, students may lack familiarity with student-centered learning, making implementation difficult until students—and their parents—become accustomed to new ways of learning (O'Neill & McMahon 2005).

In this paper, we analyze the work that school districts can do to support student-centered learning—in terms of adjusting district policy and changing classroom practices—and how much of this work now seems to be occurring in U.S. school districts.

We begin by reviewing recent research about high-performing school districts and the relationship among the characteristics that have helped to cement reform and student-centered learning approaches.

Next, we examine the scope of commonly defined student-centered practices in school districts and charter schools around the country, focusing on large districts or those that have been considered as high performing. We also consider the work of charter management organizations (CMOs), given that they function as quasi-districts. Our admittedly limited review finds many instances of structural features such as virtual or specialized schools and programs, but very few mentions of changes in everyday teaching and learning practices across all schools, suggesting that student-centered learning practices are not yet common.

In the final section, we explore the implications for districts interested in adopting various student-centered practices—what districts can and should do to implement student-centered specialized programs and student-centered approaches in all of their classrooms. We consider how they might navigate the inevitable challenges associated with moving toward

nontraditional student-centered techniques. We also pay special attention to the particular challenges of improvement at the high school level.

HOW EFFECTIVE DISTRICTS SUPPORT REFORMS TO IMPROVE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

An educational reform of the depth and breadth of implementing student-centered learning approaches will require districts to undergo monumental changes. Researchers note that districts must work toward significant structural, policy, and cultural changes that are commensurate with a new set of learning goals for students (Hargreaves & Shirley 2009). In other words, “simply improving the current one-size-fits-all system will not get the districts to where they need to go. . . . Leaders need to formulate a directional shift as efforts to improve the obsolete are actually likely to make things worse” (Friesen & Lock 2010, p. 4). We cannot simply tinker and tack on innovations and expect fundamental shifts in how districts support student learning (Harris 2008).

The roles that effective school districts play in supporting educational reform of any kind are complex and interrelated. Current research on high-performing districts—those that have improved student outcomes—emphasizes the importance of goal focus, curricular alignment, use of data, instructional leadership, professional development, partnerships, and building a culture for change. The relationship among these factors is critical. For example, we know that when district leaders articulate clear goals for reform and a strong theory of change, staff members are more likely to coordinate resources throughout the system to support implementation. We also have seen examples of districts that buffer schools from fast-changing or inconsistent state and

federal policies by helping them coordinate multiple accountability systems. Research has revealed that certain political and organizational preconditions at the district level (e.g., creating a new role for school boards; engaging stakeholders in developing a vision for improvement) increase the likelihood of sustaining reform efforts. In this section, we examine the key characteristics of high-performing districts and their relationship to implementing student-centered approaches to learning.

In focusing our research on high-performing school districts, we acknowledge that most studies define district performance in terms of student achievement on traditional measures, such as standardized tests, rather than on alternative assessments usually associated with student-centered learning. Numerous studies of high-performing school districts have been conducted in recent years (e.g., Dailey et al. 2005; Leithwood 2008; Rorrer et al. 2008; Snipes, Doolittle, & Herly 2002; Tognieri & Anderson 2003). “High-performing districts” are often defined as those that significantly improve student achievement on traditional tests. Although these studies evaluate performance improvement in ways that are unlikely to capture the variety of learning gains valued in a student-centered school, they nonetheless offer important lessons about districts that seek to support educational reform to increase student learning.

Drawing from recent studies, we highlight district practices and processes that we have found to be



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pertinent in supporting innovative approaches in general, and student-centered learning approaches in particular. The characteristics are:

- > A clear leadership focus on improving student learning;
- > Commitment to equity and excellence;
- > Combining top-down support with bottom-up innovation;
- > Learning-focused partnerships between districts and schools;
- > Data-informed decision making;
- > Capacity building at all levels; and
- > Productive partnerships with local and national organizations.

A CLEAR LEADERSHIP FOCUS ON IMPROVING STUDENT LEARNING

A comprehensive review of research found that high-performing districts develop a shared vision that focuses both on closing achievement gaps and bringing all students to high standards (Leithwood 2008). Districts should collaborate with stakeholders in the development of this vision (Foley & Sigler 2009). Protheroe (2008) calls this having the “big-picture view.” In the case of most high-performing districts, the focus is on system-wide instructional improvement as the means to improve student learning. Levin (2008) argues that districts should focus on a few key student outcomes that matter most. Districts with this kind of clear focus limit themselves to a single effort, often eliminating resource allocations to areas that do not serve the broader goal (Protheroe 2008). In other words, high-performing districts align resources, administrative

efforts, and policy around the vision of improved student learning (Friesen & Lock 2010; McKinsey & Company 2007). They also often establish performance standards above and beyond state requirements and align districtwide curriculum and assessment systems to those standards.

High-performing districts also are oriented toward continuous improvement. Such districts stay consistently focused on the core processes of teaching and learning (Elmore 2006; Friesen & Lock 2010). However, the districts also must continually build their knowledge about effective practices (Mulford 2008). Moreover, part of maintaining a focus on continuous improvement is having high long-term expectations for the organization, even in difficult times (Bowers 2008).

In a district aiming to move classrooms toward a student-centered model, we would expect to see the same clear focus and comprehensive commitment to improvement. However, the details would presumably be different. For example, a student-centered, district-endorsed curriculum would look a bit different than the tightly paced curricula used in many districts today. Presumably, it would provide more flexibility for teachers to make adjustments to suit students’ needs and interests, and it would involve more project-based rather than textbook-driven instruction. In the critical area of evaluating student outcomes, districts likely would use broader measures of achievement than we currently find in U.S. districts.

Most major studies of school districts document the need for administrators to find ways to dramatically change instruction in order to improve student learning (e.g., McKinsey & Company 2007). This appears essential in the context of implementing student-centered learning strategies, where leadership must help staff develop the capacity to teach in entirely new ways. Studies consistently report that in order to accomplish this, school and district



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administrators conceptualize their roles not simply as overseers but as instructional leaders (Bowers 2008). For some districts, an essential step has been to make teaching more public and transparent. For example, when teachers open their classrooms to instructional coaches, they are allowing critical feedback from a fresh perspective. Coaches can analyze instructional practices in real time, see the impact on students, model new approaches, and help reshape where needed (Elmore 2006). In some high-performing districts, school leaders and department chairs play a key role in observing classes on a regular basis and assisting teachers in becoming more reflective and using data to inform their instruction. These are areas in which district actions can either greatly support or constrain student-centered learning efforts. Research suggests that districts need to be able not only to share best practices but also to generate new ones. Often this means collaborating with other districts, seeking information, building upon one another's ideas, and working together to solve problems (Friesen & Lock 2010).

Joseph Murphy et al. (2006) call this kind of leadership "leadership for learning" or "instructionally focused leadership." Quite simply, in high-performing districts, "all leadership is instructional leadership" (Tupa & McFadden 2009, p. 564). Such leadership is focused on building capacity and generating the will to realize the vision of improved student learning (Rorrer et al. 2008). Citing Michael Knapp, Michael Copland, and Joan Talbert (2003), Murphy et al. (2006) describe instructional leadership as focused on creating powerful and equity-focused learning opportunities for staff and students. In doing so, leaders need to focus tightly on the core functions of schooling: teaching and learning. Murphy et al. present a framework for learner-centered leadership that is based upon a review of mostly qualitative empirical studies. However, their findings regarding learner-centered leadership coalesce well with the findings of Kenneth Leithwood (2008) whose review is based more on quantitative studies. They identify characteristics of learner-centered leaders that include having a vision for learning, focusing on the instructional program, being deeply involved in the curriculum, being knowledgeable about assessment, and having the skills to create communities of learners.

Learner-centered leaders also build relationships with parents and the community, and always act in ethically guided ways. In doing so, district administrators play an important role in creating community and political support for their vision of improved student achievement. New policies and practices require public support to survive and flourish; school boards can play an important role in helping to create what has been called a "guiding coalition" to define goals and maintain public support for them (Fullan 2006). The engagement of the community and the school board in the vision building around student-centered practices would be essential at all stages—in planning for implementation, in discussions about how evidence will be gathered to document results, and so on. Parents and community members need to be aware of how expectations for students and student work may change, as well as the implications of these changes for their own work in supporting their children's education.

COMMITMENT TO EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE

Within their vision for improving student learning, high-performing districts are committed to achieving equity and excellence. Most districts are evolving from their overly bureaucratic roots and their tolerance for a wide range of outcomes among students. This is especially true of high-performing districts. It is no longer acceptable to district leaders, the state, or the public that only a small proportion of students in a school system succeed (Foley & Sigler 2009). Leaders in such districts have sent "a clear and unwavering message [that] low expectations for any group of students was unacceptable" (Protheroe 2008, p. 38).

At the same time, effective school districts recognize that equitable outcomes are not necessarily achieved only through dividing resources equally. Rather, such districts have a "do what it takes" attitude to ensure that all students are given the resources and opportunities to be successful (Foley & Sigler 2009). This often results in targeting resources to programs for students with the greatest needs. Numerous districts provide "just in time" support for students in academic difficulty so that they do not fall far behind. Principals and teachers are encouraged to



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use benchmark and other assessment data to identify students in need of assistance (Protheroe 2008).

Keeping both excellence and equity at the forefront of the district’s agenda is key in supporting student-centered learning approaches. For example, research by Linda Skrla, James J. Scheurich, and Joseph F. Johnson (2000) demonstrates that in districts that have raised achievement for low-income students and students of color, district leaders moved their staff into thinking about students in terms of their assets, rather than their deficits; they also focused on ensuring that all children reached high standards. Such leaders honor diversity, promote dialogue among diverse stakeholders, and have high expectations for all children (Murphy et al. 2006).

as they argue that the increased standardization makes it difficult to meet students’ individual needs (Protheroe 2008).³ This would presumably pose a barrier for implementing student-centered practices, as well. Ultimately, teacher support for any reform effort is critical, and leaders would be wise to consider how reform efforts can be structured to genuinely motivate rather than alienate teachers (Thompson, Sykes, & Skrla 2008).

Motivating teachers while maintaining administrative pressure involves a tricky balance (Thompson, Sykes, & Skrla 2008). There is increasing evidence that developing a sharper focus on improving student learning depends on more than simply having tight coupling between a district and its schools. Rather, the relationship between schools and districts involves tight coupling in some areas and loose coupling in others. There are benefits to providing top-down support yet allowing for bottom-up innovation. As educational change expert Michael Fullan (1994) stated, “Neither top-down nor bottom-up strategies for educational reform work. What is required is a more sophisticated blend of the two” (p. 1). Fullan further explained that in an increasingly complex, changing world:

[T]op-down strategies result in conflict and/or superficial compliance. Expecting local units to flourish through laissez-faire decentralization leads to drift, ad hocness and/or inertia. Combined strategies which capitalize on the center’s strengths (to provide perspective direction, incentives, networking, and retrospective monitoring) and local capacity (to learn, create, respond to, and feed into overall directions) are more likely to achieve greater overall coherence. Such systems also have greater accountability because the need to obtain political support for ideas is built in to the patterns of interaction (Fullan 2006, p. 1).

COMBINING TOP-DOWN SUPPORT WITH BOTTOM-UP INNOVATION

The focus on improving student learning provides educators with a shared purpose that helps guide decision making around curricula, professional development, and classroom practice. However, this does not necessarily mean having a lock-step curriculum and instructional plan (Foley & Sigler 2009). It involves ensuring that time, resources, and attention are oriented around instruction. It might involve establishing supports for improving student learning, such as the development of new teaching and learning tools, timely instructional interventions, and extended learning opportunities for both students and teachers (Foley & Sigler 2009). That said, many districts have implemented a districtwide curriculum, particularly for tested subjects, that in some cases has been met with teacher frustration

Related Paper in the *Students at the Center* Series²

For more on raising standards for low-income students, see *Literacy Practices for African-American Male Adolescents*, by Alfred W. Tatum.



series

Alex Bowers (2008) calls this notion providing boundaries through an organized, disciplined system, yet providing for creativity and innovation within the boundaries. Others call it “tight-loose management” (Peters & Waterman 1982, in Bowers 2008) or being “nimble and flexible, rather than hidebound” (Rothman 2009, p. 3). In sum, effective school districts have a “balance of prescription and guidance from the central office combined with flexibility and autonomy for schools” (Foley & Sigler 2009, p. 7).

Additional knowledge is still needed with respect to what exactly should be centralized and what should be decentralized, or what should be mandated and what should be left flexible. Districts continue to struggle with finding the appropriate balance, and indeed we find that high-performing school systems vary greatly in terms of what is centralized and what is not.

For example, New York City, Oakland, and Edmonton have delegated significant authority on budget and operations to schools (Moffit 2009). Although numerous high-performing districts that have been studied have a common curricular framework aligned with assessments, this brings both benefits and challenges, as noted. In determining the appropriate balance between centralization and decentralization, it is useful for school and district leaders and other stakeholders to collectively define what arrangements would best support student learning (Moffit 2009). Almost half of the studies that Leithwood (2008) reviewed showed evidence of district efforts to align their resources, personnel policies, and organizational structures in support of the overall vision. Some of the new structures and policies that have evolved included site-based decision making, an extended school day and year, personnel policies focused on recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers, and new ways of evaluating principal performance. Many of these characteristics would seem to be important in implementing student-centered approaches to learning. The overall goal of structural arrangements

should be to align processes to support student learning.

LEARNING-FOCUSED PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS

A key feature of high-performing districts that have been successful in supporting instructional change is what Meredith Honig and Michael Copland (2008) call “learning-focused partnerships with schools.” This necessitates the development of new roles and relationships and a change in the culture of the district. Instead of focusing on monitoring and compliance, district administrators develop partnerships with school leaders, which focus on jointly identifying problems of practice, developing public theories of action that support student learning, aligning policies and practices with the theories of action, and continually interrogating the theories, policies, and practices using evidence. These partnerships are rooted in notions of reciprocal accountability and the idea that both district offices and schools hold important knowledge about improving student learning. Honig and Copland (2008) make a compelling case for the key role of district staff in school improvement, arguing that many past efforts at school reform failed due to limited central office participation.

In other words, districts need to develop new kinds of support relationships with schools that place student learning at the forefront. In studies of the Oakland Unified School District and Chicago Public Schools, Honig (2009) identifies how the districts enable the implementation of small autonomous, student-centered schools. Her work is especially pertinent to efforts to implement student-centered learning approaches: It highlights the important processes of bridging and buffering that the districts engage in as they negotiate new ways of working with schools. Administrators in newly established small-schools



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offices at the district level function in these roles to ensure that innovative activities can be supported and are not thwarted by district policies. For example, these administrators smooth the way when a school experiments with not giving students conventional letter grades. They helped translate the school's unique evaluations and pave the way for future policy changes to support new ways of reporting student learning.

Rorrer and colleagues' (2008) review of research on districts underscores the importance of changing district cultures in similar ways. They note that providing open, clear lines of communication between teachers and their districts is essential for promoting the professional community required to support instructional reform. The authors cite Richard F. Elmore and Deanna Burney's (1997) well-known study of New York City's District #2 as a prime example of how shifting the culture to one in which expertise is shared and ideas are generated through collaborative work facilitated the learning partnerships that the district was attempting to cultivate with schools.

DATA-INFORMED DECISION MAKING

High-performing districts have been found to integrate the examination of data and evidence-informed decision making into daily school and district processes (Foley & Sigler 2009; Leithwood 2008). To improve instruction, evidence of student learning needs to be actively used to guide instructional and curricular decisions. This would certainly be the case with student-centered learning. However, what counts as "data" would likely be more wide-ranging in a district implementing student-centered practices. Student self and peer assessments likely also play a role. Nevertheless, there are important lessons to be learned about how districts focused on more traditional measures have used data and the structures and norms that have supported their work.



To improve instruction, evidence of student learning needs to be actively used to guide instructional and curricular decisions. This would certainly be the case with student-centered learning.

Related Paper in the *Students at the Center Series*⁴

For more information on data and assessment in the context of student-centered learning approaches, see *Assessing Learning*, by Heidi Andrade, Kristen Huff, and Georgia Brooke.



Districts need to provide a great deal of support in order to help schools use data to inform decision making (Diamond & Spillane 2004; Ingram, Louis, & Schroeder 2004; Marsh et al. 2005). Many districts have invested in management information systems and professional development to develop expertise and capacity at the school level (Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter 2007). They have found that scheduling time for teacher collaboration within departmental and course-alike groups is essential for teachers to discuss data and action plans together. Some districts have contracted with external agencies and consultants to assist in their capacity-building efforts districtwide (Marsh et al. 2005). Similarly, charter management organizations have also sought to build capacity for data use (Colby, Smith, & Shelton 2005). Many CMOs expressly utilize data-driven decision making as one of their pillars of continuous improvement (Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter 2007; Datnow, Park, & Kennedy 2008). Districts can also play a key role in bringing relevant research to the attention of educators and creating a climate in which practice is guided by evidence (Coburn & Talbert 2006).

Establishing a culture of data use requires leadership at all levels to help teachers make sense of data by defining the purpose of data use and creating a clear expectation that decisions will be made on the basis of data. For example, in her summary of research on how districts support school improvement, Nancy Protheroe (2008) states that central offices send a signal that principals and teachers would be held accountable for student learning, and that evidence would be required to document their results. Creating the expectation for decision making on the basis of evidence is certainly important, but teachers also need to be carefully brought along so that they

feel comfortable sharing data about their students' learning with one another and with administrators. School and district leaders can play a key role in developing and modeling norms of trust and collaboration around data use (Datnow et al. 2007, 2008).

It is important to note that districts that are leaders in the area of data use rely on a broad range of evidence to inform decision making. Such districts focus on a variety of data sources, including standardized assessments, placement data, benchmarks, observational data, and other sources at the system and school levels. At the classroom level, teachers use a combination of informal and formal assessments to guide their practice and action planning. One study found that when districts work on defining what "data" or "evidence" means in their local contexts, a more complex definition of student learning goals emerges (Datnow, Park, & Kennedy 2008). Some districts gather and analyze student engagement data to use as a tool for improving student involvement in their own learning.

These findings seem particularly pertinent to the work of districts implementing student-centered approaches to learning. Clearly, not all of the elements of student-centered practices would lend themselves to easy measurement, and yet they would need to be carefully documented in order to show results. Organizing teachers into professional learning communities so that they could discuss evidence of student learning and new ways of assessing students would be critical in the implementation of student-centered learning approaches.

CAPACITY BUILDING AT ALL LEVELS

Helping district staff adopt new roles and relationships with schools requires significant capacity building. High-performing districts are

characterized by a heavy investment in capacity building among leaders and teachers. They also ensure that all professional development activities are in the service of the larger goal of improving student achievement. Professional development activities are designed to reflect the different needs of school leaders and teachers, and they are built upon knowledge of best practices for adult learning (Leithwood 2008).

Honig (2009) talks about the fact that funders often invest in schools rather than districts; meanwhile there is a great need for districts to build their own capacity to support school improvement. In the districts they studied, Honig and Copland (2008) found significant investments in the professional development of central office administrators. Often, capacity-building efforts are built around encouraging district office staff to take on new roles as facilitators of educational reform and improvement. This change in the work of the central office is a key element in the efforts that lead to improved student outcomes in Ontario in recent years (Levin 2008). Capacity building also involves district staff learning how to network with one another to support learning in schools. In some cases, district staff identify best practices in schools and find ways to replicate them in other school sites (Protheroe 2008). They provide customized support to schools based on need (Dailey et al. 2005).

On a more general level, in addition to building capacity at the central office, high-performing districts have found ways to attract talented educators and leaders to schools, provide ongoing professional development and mentoring, effectively evaluate personnel, and align compensation and incentives toward organizational goals (Bowers 2008; Foley & Sigler 2009; Leithwood 2008; Protheroe 2008). Such districts commit to improving professional learning at all levels of the system, from induction throughout teachers' careers (Dailey et al. 2005). If we are to realize new visions for student



There is a great need for districts to build their own capacity to support school improvement.

learning, a great deal of capacity building is required at the school level in terms of building teachers' pedagogical skills, content knowledge, and ability to work with one another and with parents (Levin 2008). Particularly, with respect to student-centered learning, teachers will likely need help "building their repertoire of instructional strategies as they work to ensure all students make needed progress towards instructional goals" (Cawelti & Protheroe 2007, p. 49).

PRODUCTIVE PARTNERSHIPS WITH LOCAL AND NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Most research on high-performing districts highlights their ability to partner with other organizations. Smart districts, as described by Ellen Foley and David Sigler (2009), partner with and involve a wide range of community agencies, parent and community groups, and other organizations. These partnerships can be used to help leverage additional resources into the school system. For example, collaborative relationships between colleges and districts can help improve coherence with respect to teacher training and instructional practice, as well as support teacher capacity building through mentoring (Darling-Hammond et al. 2009). Such relationships can also be used strategically to help build trust between district offices and schools and to sustain educational reform (Chun et al. 2008).

Partnerships can take different forms and have different functions. In Honig and Copland's (2008) study, external partnerships were aimed specifically at improving the district's capacity to support student learning. Often, staff from an external school improvement organization model how district staff could effectively support principals in instructional leadership. In Sklar, Scheurich, and Johnson's (2000) study, external partners help to build the districts' visions for equity-minded school reform and aid in its spread within the wider community.

Research on the implementation of comprehensive school reform models in the 1990s also provides important lessons regarding partnerships with external organizations. Susan J. Bodilly's (1998) evaluation of the New American Schools designs found that schools with higher levels of reform implementation exist in districts that have stable leadership and an absence of political crises, a history of trust between the central office and schools, and resources to support implementation. Notably, such districts also provide a level of school autonomy that is commensurate with requirements of the reform model being implemented at the site. Amanda Datnow, Lea Hubbard, and Hugh Mehan's (2002) research on comprehensive school reform designs shares some similar conclusions. Their findings underscore the ways in which district actions are not simply determinant of the outcomes of reform at the schools, but rather, along with a myriad of other factors including school and design team support, help to co-construct the success or failure of educational reform at the school level.

A key partnership that is required between districts and their external communities is with local teacher organizations. Some studies of high-performing districts simply note that harmonious relations between the board and the teachers' union facilitate reform. In *How to Change 5000 Schools*, Levin (2008) goes further, explaining that constant effort is required to engage teacher organizations in conversations about the needs of teachers and the public education system as a whole. This is a clear lesson for districts engaged in student-centered learning practices. Undertaking such a reform will require developing and maintaining productive relationships with teacher organizations, as well as with other key external partners, as noted.



Schools with higher levels of reform implementation exist in districts that have stable leadership and an absence of political crises, a history of trust between the central office and schools, and resources to support implementation.

THE SCOPE OF STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING IN THE UNITED STATES

Building upon this review of research about high-performing school districts and their relationship to student-centered approaches to learning, we now turn our attention to an examination of the scope of commonly defined student-centered practices in school districts and charter schools around the country.

The purpose of this project is to review the literature on school districts, focusing specifically on how school systems can support student-centered approaches to deeper learning. As shown in the previous section, there is considerable research about how school districts can support standards-based educational reform to improve student achievement but little evidence about how to implement student-centered learning approaches to reach the same goal. Similarly, there is almost no literature documenting the extent of district efforts to implement these practices in the United States. Our methodological approach is an effort to scope out how student-centered learning fits into current district reform agendas. One of the most feasible ways of doing so within the bounds of time and resources available for our work was to review the websites of selected districts and charter management organizations to discern the ways in which they reflect ideas of student-centered learning. We believed this approach would allow us to form a sense of the prominence of student-centered learning practices among district initiatives.

In this section, we present evidence and the results from our website review and consider the challenges associated with defining the range of practices that are considered student centered. We also offer examples of the student-centered strategies in use and discuss our thoughts about their depth and breadth. We focus specifically on districts deemed high performing, believing we would find the most

innovation in these places. The evidence supporting a variety of student-centered practices and their impacts on student learning outcomes is still in its infancy. Therefore, to the extent this review reveals if and how high-performing districts utilize student-centered learning approaches, it is perhaps a useful first step toward identifying the kinds of student-centered learning programs and practices that hold the most promise for district improvement and high performance.

Although some forms of student-centered practices may not be revealed on websites, we believe the “face” image on the districts’ websites does usually reveal major priorities and areas of focus. This image reflects the district’s goals, values, major projects and achievements, and current undertakings that may or may not embody student-centered principles. Most notably, we identified on the websites examples of every form of student-centered learning approach identified by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (e.g., early college high schools; self-paced curricula; hybrid online programs; themed small schools). However, we recognize that this methodology has significant limitations in that website content may not fully reflect system initiatives. Our findings should be regarded as indicative, not definitive.

We begin the section by considering the challenges associated with defining the range of practices that count as student-centered learning, followed by a description of the framework that we use to organize our search results. We then outline our online search strategy, present the results in the form of a rough typology of commonly employed approaches, and provide notable student-centered practice examples for both school districts and CMOs related to our framework.

SORTING THROUGH THE DEFINITIONS OF STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING PRACTICES

An evident challenge of this work is clarifying and defining the scope of practices that constitute genuine student-centered learning. One can imagine generally that “student-centered” involves: an idea of placing the needs and desires of students at the forefront; personalizing instruction in an enjoyable and enriching format that engages students; individualizing instruction to match student learning styles; and allowing for a significant amount of student choice. However, with these larger ideas in mind, how would student-centered learning actually appear in practice? Which sets of practices should we count as student-centered learning approaches?

For example, some may consider a given charter school to be student centered due to an alternative philosophy, while in everyday practice it may look very much like a traditional school in its classroom setup and instructional strategies and have few truly student-centered features. The same may be true of a Web-based, “virtual” program that breaks down the industrial model’s notions of time in the classroom, yet uses textbook-style instruction and standardized assessments. Not all “alternatives” embody key features of student-centered learning.

To sort through the various notions of student-centered learning and categorize our findings, we developed a framework that outlines a spectrum of student-centered practices along a continuum of changes to the traditional educational model.⁵ It includes the main elements of schooling: the what (curriculum), when (time), where (location), who (relationships), how (pedagogical), and how do we know (assessment). This was useful in that it outlined a continuum of practices one could consider student centered. Nevertheless, the challenge with such a continuum is that almost any practice can be placed in one or more of these categories.

We also drew on a description of the key principles of student-centered learning that challenge the current education paradigm: embracing the learner’s experience and learning theory as the starting point for educational practice; expanding learning opportunities so that they may occur “anytime, anywhere”; reshaping the role of the educator to guide more than drive instruction; and determining individual progression based on mastery.⁶

SEARCH STRATEGY

We began our search by looking at districts that have been characterized in some way as high performing. These are not our own judgments about performance but rather judgments made by various others using a range of criteria. Since our purpose here is to get some sense of the breadth of student-centered learning practice, whether these judgments are similar is less important than having a range of districts that are seen, in some way or another, as high performing or improving. We first investigated the winners and finalists of the Broad Prize for Urban Education within the last decade because these districts go through a quality review process. By reviewing many of the award-winning districts and finalists, we gained a general sense of the kinds of student-centered practices these school districts implement.

Other high-performing districts were selected by a snowball sample approach. For instance, we located districts that supported particular programs that use elements of student-centered learning (e.g., Big Picture Schools; Bassetti architect projects; specialist schools) and others by performing a Google search of high-performing districts. We also relied on recommendations, personal knowledge, and the media. We attempted to select districts across a range of states to achieve a more meaningful sense of the breadth of typically employed student-centered practices across the country. In total we reviewed evidence of student-centered approaches to learning



In total we reviewed evidence of student-centered approaches to learning on the websites of 35 districts in 20 states. The group included very large and rather small districts, both urban and rural.

on the websites of 35 districts in 20 states. The group included very large and rather small districts, both urban and rural. This list is by no means exhaustive, nor can it be considered representative of the 15,000 districts in the United States. Rather, it expresses an effort to look at student-centered practices in districts considered high-performing.

We examined evidence of student-centered practices through a review of the districts' websites, investigating features such as the districts' mission statement and goals, kinds of schools and programs offered (e.g., alternative, charter, magnet, atypical, virtual), system-wide initiatives and policies related to achievement, choice, pedagogical practice, and equity, as well as other relevant programming. The review began at the home page with general descriptive information of the district, followed by a general review of each column or row heading on the main page. Again, while we recognize that such a review would not necessarily reveal all student-centered learning work in a district, given how much information most of these sites did contain about district programs and priorities, it is hard for us to believe that there would be many, if any, districts in our sample where features of student-centered learning were important priorities without having some mention on the website.

We also searched the recently emerging and growing area of CMOs. We include CMOs because a charter network could be considered a system of schools in much the same way as a district. In the past two decades, many influential philanthropic organizations have invested substantially in CMOs (Lake et al. 2010). Often replicated within and across states, these models are guided by CMO oversight, enabling growth of a particular educational model. The larger network generates more state funds, which allows the CMO to spend more on facility and operational needs than can individual charter schools (Smith et al. 2009). Many of these CMOs (e.g., Aspire, Green Dot, KIPP, High Tech High) are recognizable and have developed a following

of supporters among educators, college faculty, and students. Some have developed alternative teacher preparation and certification programs unique to their educational missions and models (e.g., YES Prep, High Tech High) while others retain strong ties with teacher-supply programs (e.g., Teach For America).

We used a website review strategy similar to that with the districts and reviewed the websites of 25 CMOs, which collectively operate in at least 25 states. Examples of practices that we thought were more consistent with student-centered learning (involving more than one element of the framework, and adhering to more than one of the key attributes of student-centered learning provided in the student-centered learning working definition by JFF) were copied into a spreadsheet using the categories in Table 1 on the page 15. Of course, there often is considerable overlap between approaches. For instance, a "virtual" program can have variations of who is teaching and how the instruction is implemented. We sought to place each example in a category of best fit.

DISTRICT SEARCH RESULTS

Our research reveals that student-centered learning is still in its infancy as an educational model; student-centered practices most often employed by these districts tend to be programmatic and, in some sense, peripheral to the daily lives of teachers and students across all schools in the system. While we found many initiatives that appear to embody aspects of student-centered learning, rather than supporting system-wide changes in the daily cultures of schools, it appears that districts are more likely to create specialized programs that reach a small proportion of students. These often appear in the form of district-sponsored or partnership virtual learning programs, early college high schools and dual credit programs, charter and independent schools, or experimental "pilot" schools, to list a few.



Our research reveals that student-centered learning is still in its infancy as an educational model; student-centered practices most often employed by these districts tend to be programmatic and, in some sense, peripheral to the daily lives of teachers and students across all schools in the system.

Our search revealed little evidence of system-wide initiatives that move toward student-centered learning approaches in all schools by changing the nature of relations between teachers and students, modifying or reconfiguring scheduling periods, or shifting the

nature of instruction and curriculum content to meet student choices and preferences, for example. Again, these efforts were represented at programmatic levels that often reached only subgroups of students—for instance, the virtual program that provides an

TABLE 1
THE STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING LANDSCAPE: ELEMENTS, PRINCIPLES, AND
EXAMPLES OF PRACTICES IN DISTRICTS AND CMOS

ELEMENTS	WHAT Curriculum	WHEN Time	WHERE Location	WHO Relationships	HOW Pedagogy	HOW DO WE KNOW Assessment
PRINCIPLES	21st-century skills (e.g., critical thinking; creativity; technological skills) Service learning Character education Extra academic support to promote college entry	Flexible scheduling Anytime, anywhere Changing modified attendance and timetable policies Extended school day Extended school year Multiple enrollment/graduation options	Outside-the-classroom learning Changed physical space of classrooms Off-school-site learning Anytime, anywhere	Reshaped relationships between student and teacher Collaborative efforts between community, parents, teachers	Mastery-based or self-paced Learning experience or theory as a starting point Personalization and choice built into the curriculum	Variety of formative/summative assessments 21st-century data systems that may account for range of social and emotional learning competencies
EXAMPLES	Special interest schools (e.g., science and math; the arts; public policy) Districtwide curriculum initiative or program	Afterschool options Virtual schools Hybrid online-classrooms Home schooling	Internships Community learning credit options Flexible classroom spaces School reconstruction projects	Small schools Small class sizes Personalized designs Collaborative professional development Distributed leadership Community-district partnerships Mandatory parent involvement	Personalized learning plans Differentiated instruction No tracking Project-based learning Early college schools Dual credit	Student-generated, criterion-referenced assessments Learning progression summative assessments



As with districts, few educational models provided by charter programs disrupt many “industrial” notions of classroom culture and learning. However, without closer examination of the daily reality of these schools, one cannot know the extent to which principles of student-centered learning are embodied in the cultural makeup of the school.

“anytime, anywhere” option, the dual credit high school program accelerating student learning, and the charter school with individualized learning plans. These elements do not seem frequent in system-wide initiatives aimed at changing the daily lives of students and teachers across all schools, at least based upon our content analysis of system websites.

After searching the websites of many districts, we saw patterns in the kinds of approaches utilized. Table 2 (on page 17) presents a typology of approaches along with examples found in our search. They illustrate common cases of student-centered approaches to learning implemented at the district level in high-performing school districts.

CMO SEARCH RESULTS

One might expect to find evidence of more student-centered learning approaches in CMOs and their related programs than in districts because the former, by definition, provide alternative educational models to those provided by districts. However, our search results did not find this always to be the case. Again, “alternative” or “innovative” is not synonymous with student-centered learning. As with districts, few educational models provided by charter programs disrupt many “industrial” notions of classroom culture and learning. However, without closer examination of the daily reality of these schools, one cannot know the extent to which principles of student-centered learning are embodied in the cultural makeup of the school.

It is important not to confuse a statement of intention (e.g., “our schools focus on strong and positive

relationships between students and staff”) with reality. We did find elements of student-centered practices in the educational models of some charter schools, and we created a typology of some of those (see *Table 3 on page 17*). We listed a few examples for each approach; they are not all-inclusive. In some cases, such as some of the specific instructional approaches, charter schools may be running in directions quite inconsistent with student-centered approaches to learning.

EXAMPLES OF STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING APPROACHES ACROSS THE UNITED STATES

To demonstrate the scope and variety of student-centered learning approaches we found, we organized them into a summary chart. Table 1 (on page 15) lists the basic elements of education—the What, When, Where, Who, How, and How Do We Know—along with key student-centered principles of each element. The bottom row provides examples of student-centered practices that align with the principles in each element category.

WHAT—CURRICULUM

The content of instruction—what is taught—is a critical component of student-centered learning because it has a strong impact on student engagement. Student-centered approaches to learning ideally integrate the interest and needs of students into the core curriculum and draw attention to 21st-century skills. Student-centered curricula are responsive to the



Student-centered curricula are responsive to the multiple facets of student growth—the creative, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual—and align with what is known about how different students learn best.

TABLE 2
SIGNIFICANT STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING PRACTICES EMPLOYED BY HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOL DISTRICTS

APPROACH	CASE EXAMPLES
Dual credit and early college programs	Brownsville Early College High School; College Academy at Broward College; Socorro Independent School District, Mission Early College School
District-supported virtual schools	Gwinnett County Schools Online Campus; Colorado Cyber School
District-supported specialty schools	Highline Public Schools Choice Academy, Global Connections School, and Waskowitz Outdoor Programs; Big Picture Schools, San Diego Unified Learning Choice Academy
Choice and admission processes	Cincinnati Public Schools, Schools of Choice High Schools; School of Philadelphia citywide admission
Community-district partnerships	Long Beach Linked Learning Program; Partners in Education volunteer programs; Chicago Public Schools Community Schools Initiative
Pilot programs	Chicago's Renaissance 2010 Initiative; NYC Izone; Boston Public Schools Pilot Schools; Baltimore City Public Schools, Office of New Initiatives
Districtwide curriculum specific initiatives and programs	Character education; service-learning; common core curriculum; 21st-century skills; digital conversations
School reconstruction projects	Highline and Cincinnati Public Schools reconstruction projects

TABLE 3
SIGNIFICANT STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING PRACTICES EMPLOYED BY CMOS

APPROACH	CASE EXAMPLES
Small class sizes, small school and personalized designs	Aspire Public Schools; High Tech High; Lighthouse Academies; YES Prep
Curriculum-specific programs	Great Heart Academies "classical" focus; Arthur Academy "core knowledge"; Cesar Chavez Public Charter Schools "public policy"
Mandatory parent involvement	Perspective Charter Schools; Green Dot Public Schools
Afterschool programming and internships	Mastery Charter Schools; High Tech High
Extended school day	KIPP; Lighthouse; Aspire Public Schools; Uncommon Schools
Alternative teacher induction	High Tech High; Lighthouse Academies
College bound support, no tracking	IDEA "Road to College"; ICEF Public Schools "College Readiness Model"; YES Prep "Personalized College Counseling"
Instruction-specific strategies	Arthur Academy "direct instruction"; Mastery Charter Schools "mastery learning"; High Tech High "character education"; Perspective Charter schools "a disciplined life"; Imagine schools (focus varies by school and location)

multiple facets of student growth—the creative, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual—and align with what is known about how different students learn best.

A common student-centered curricular approach for districts is to offer special “alternatives” in the form of magnet, atypical, independent, and virtual school options. These are publicly funded schools operated by the district, but they provide unusual educational models that are separate from the way traditional classrooms operate. Many offer specific programming to meet the needs and interests of a certain niche group of students, such as those who want to pursue the arts, health, sciences, or other specific fields. They also integrate student voice and choice in curricular content. Some CMOs focus all of their schools in a specialized curricular area, such as the public policy specialty of Cesar Chavez Schools and the arts-infused curriculum of Lighthouse Academies.

One district that offers a variety of student-centered curricula is the Highline Public Schools in Washington State. Highline’s specialized alternatives feature Aviation High School (the only high school in the nation specializing in aviation). Its offerings also include Global Connections High School, Health Sciences and Human Services High School, a “Big Picture” school, Waskowitz Outdoor School, and CHOICE academy, among others.

Highline’s CHOICE academy is one example of a district’s efforts to integrate student interests and choices in curricular programming while maintaining a set of standard requirements. This is an example of an individualized learning plan as it combines student interest in learning topics with the standardized curriculum. At CHOICE, students have flexible hours and a shorter school day. They can create, in partnership with parents and teachers, some courses that meet their goals and interests but are accomplished outside of school hours and off school grounds. For instance, a competitive athlete might choose his or her sport to fulfill a physical education requirement, or (as highlighted in a CHOICE video) a student with an area of passion (e.g., horseback riding; dancing; firefighting) might opt for this interest to fulfill an elective requirement. Students design all of their electives, which the school then documents. Waskowitz Outdoor School, another specialized program at Highline, has a particular focus on

environmental education, team building, and outdoor education.

CHOICE Academy Video⁷

At CHOICE, students have flexible hours and a shorter school day. A student with an area of passion (e.g., horseback riding; dancing; firefighting) might opt for this interest to fulfill an elective requirement.



video

WHEN—TIME

Student-centered learning approaches can challenge widespread beliefs about the use of time in classrooms. In the traditional model, schools follow highly structured periods of subject-matter instruction with six- to seven-hour school days within an academic calendar of nine months (or sometimes year-round). Student-centered practices disrupt this notion by responding to the needs of the learner in an “anytime, anywhere” fashion. Students have greater choice about when and where they learn, as it fits their needs, lifestyle, and goals.

One often-used approach to the “when” element of learning is online instruction, increasingly developed and supported by districts or states. For example, Colorado Cyber Academy, administered by the Douglas County School District, offers a comprehensive K-12 cyber program available to any student in the state at no cost. As its website suggests, “We understand that not all students thrive in a traditional public school because not all students learn the same way . . . students enrolled in Colorado Cyber can learn at any time at their own pace, while also having access to support, feedback, and guidance through their online experience.” The program encourages applications from students who “enjoy community-based, project learning and are looking for a learning environment that accommodates all learning styles.” Other districts have implemented similar programs, including Broward Virtual School in Florida and Gwinnett County Online School Campus in Georgia.

Another approach to flexible scheduling is evident in the many CMOs that extend the school day and, in some cases, the school year. Aspire Public Schools, for instance, provide a 7 1/2-hour school day and 190 days of instruction per year, 10 more days than the traditional year. They also reorganize the traditional calendar when possible by dividing the year into

trimesters with intermittent recesses. The school days are scheduled in block segments of 90 to 120 minutes per subject. Annual “inter-sessions” of learning provide one- to two-week periods of deep exploration of a particular topic. Other CMOs with extended school days include KIPP and Uncommon schools. However, some extended school days may consist entirely of very traditional teaching and learning practices.

WHERE—LOCATION

Student-centered learning approaches disrupt conventional ideas about where learning takes place. The typical model places students in a classroom, learning at desks. Student-centered practices encourage learning outside the classroom—in the community, outdoors, or even at home. Examples include work-based internships, virtual programs, and community-credit learning options (earning academic credit while pursuing learning in a community organization). Student-centered learning approaches can also reshape the physical design of the classroom to be more personalized, flexible, and welcoming.

One notable example is the Cincinnati Public Schools, a district that is creating 35 new buildings and renovating 16 more, paying particular attention to design principles that best support student learning, including welcoming common areas, abundant natural light, and technology-ready classrooms. In relation to instructional practice, all of the elementary schools are designed with four enclosed classrooms clustered around open spaces called “extended learning areas.” These are places where students can feel comfortable and connect with one another across classrooms.

The High Tech High Schools in San Diego, California, are also thoughtful in terms of the approach to school design. Drawing on effective design principles, features at HTH include shared teacher offices, multipurpose rooms, outdoor learning spaces, gallery spaces, and the use of common rooms that serve as intellectual hubs, communal meeting areas, and gathering spaces for school and community events. These spaces reflect principles such as flexibility (spaces adapt to multiple uses), transparency (use of glass, for instance, to create a “visible” learning environment), and ownership (personalized learning space by creating small learning clusters).

WHO—RELATIONSHIPS

Student-centered learning approaches value and integrate the knowledge of members of the community and the variety of people in each student’s core personal networks, including family members, professionals, peers, mentors, and other significant figures. The “who” element is about the relational aspects of students to the adult supportive figures around them. Student-centered learning practices reshape the power relations between adult and child by creating collaborative partnerships in the learning process and encouraging synergistic efforts among all members of the community. It may mean students, in partnership with adults, have a stronger voice in how the learning process is designed; that students are taught not simply by teachers but by members of the community; and that boundaries around authority are broken.

Many districts offer programs that encourage parental and community involvement in schools in the form of volunteer opportunities and community hubs. Cincinnati Public Schools created campuses called “Community Learning Centers” that are designed to strengthen links between schools and communities. These centers act as “hubs” for the community, providing a range of recreational, educational, and cultural opportunities (e.g., after school activities for youth; adult education; college counseling; tutoring; early childhood education; art and culture programs; physical and health services). The Community Schools Initiative of the Chicago Public Schools is a similar example, offering 150 “community schools” with health services, social services, and adult educational programs (recreation and educational, for instance). Community schools also forge strong partnerships with local nonprofit organizations.

HOW—PEDAGOGY

The question of how students learn is, of course, at the heart of student-centered learning. It describes many of the “cultural” elements of instructional practice in schools. A student-centered learning environment personalizes instruction (targeted toward student learning styles, preferences, goals, and needs); is drawn from research about how students most effectively learn; and is responsive to the well-being and experiential aspects of being a student. Student-centered learning approaches also encourage

self-pacing through the curriculum and progression to the next level based on mastery rather than time spent on a topic.

Districts have drawn from respected and evidence-based instructional strategies in their attempts to reach all students in the classroom—for instance, using differentiated instruction and project-based assessment. However, a more dramatic student-centered practice designed to accelerate student learning comes in early college high schools and dual credit programs. The Socorro Independent School District in Texas, as one example, “enables highly motivated students to move in four years from the ninth grade through the first two years of college, earning the Associate of Arts degree.” Other districts offer analogous accelerated options, such as Broward County Public School’s College Academy at Broward College.

Some districts have experimented with student-centered, standards-based models that eliminate grade levels, as well as the use of the traditional A-F grading system, and instead group all students by ability. The goal for such an approach is to customize learning and reach students who are struggling by tailoring instruction to their individual levels. A complementary desire is to give students greater ownership of their studies by allowing them to set the pace of their progression, as well as by ensuring they are challenged by learning material at the cusp of their abilities.

The implementation of such a mastery-based approach was first tried in Alaska’s Chugach district as part of the Alaska Quality Schools Initiative. A small and low-performing school system of 200 students living across 22,000 square miles, the district significantly increased its students’ reading

scores on state and national assessments (Meyer 2008). The nonprofit foundation Re-Inventing Schools Coalition has since been established, providing a comprehensive school reform framework based on Alaska’s model. A number of school districts in Alaska, as well as a few districts and charter schools in other states, have implemented the model. Examples include the Adams 50 school district near Denver; the Maine Department of Education; and Ingenium Charter Schools in Los Angeles.

HOW DO WE KNOW—ASSESSMENT

In student-centered approaches to learning, students demonstrate their skills and expertise in multiple forms of assessments—both formative (used during the learning process to inform instruction) and summative (evaluation and summary of learning at a point in time). Pedagogy and content are adjusted to meet the range of student proficiencies, and data systems are used in ever evolving and sophisticated ways to track student progress.

While assessment is an essential element of student-centered learning, changes in student assessment practices often encounter a great deal of resistance in schools and communities. It is certainly conventional practice for districts to support data-driven approaches and implement a range of assessments to track student progress. But rarely, if ever, do these forms capture the complex ranges of emotional and social competencies or other more intangible aspects of learning that are valued in student-centered learning approaches. Private foundations, such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Stupski Foundation, and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, have turned an eye toward developing novel assessments that consider such complexity, but these approaches are at their inception.



A student-centered learning environment personalizes instruction (targeted toward student learning styles, preferences, goals, and needs); is drawn from research about how students most effectively learn; and is responsive to the well-being and experiential aspects of being a student. Student-centered learning approaches also encourage self-pacing through the curriculum and progression to the next level based on mastery rather than time spent on a topic.

Some CMOs have developed specialized assessments that they suggest are unique to their programs. Lighthouse Academies, an arts-focused CMO, utilizes assessment based on “concepts and content” whereas teachers use “exemplar” work and facilitate group feedback. The idea is to shift the focus from the student to the work product. Aspire Public Schools use project rubrics and qualitative teacher observations along with traditional state-based assessments.

racial and economic segregation. Choices may have to be made about which elements of student-centered learning will be prioritized.

In the final section of the paper, we consider the implications of the analysis so far for the work of school districts.

POSSIBILITIES

Our website review suggests several possibilities:

- > Although virtually every organization we looked at has some elements consistent with ideas of student-centered learning, we were more struck that many elements of student-centered learning are not very evident either in the official descriptions of the work of school districts or the programmatic descriptions of CMOs.
- > In the districts, most of the examples we found were programmatic in nature—such as specialized programs for particular groups of students, rather than aiming at system-wide adoption of student-centered learning ideas and practices.
- > One should not confuse a statement of intention (e.g., “our schools focus on strong and positive relationships between students and staff”) with reality. Organization practice in all fields often falls short of organization ideals or rhetoric. In particular, one would want evidence from students before concluding that student-centered practices are deeply embedded, even where they are claimed to be present.
- > Various features of student-centered learning may distract from or even conflict with one another. For example, efforts to remove barriers of time and space may actually make it harder for teachers to get to know students well, while a strong emphasis on good student-teacher relations may militate against relaxing rules on attendance. Opening up what counts as learning to, say, community or postsecondary study may make it harder to build strong communities inside a school. Providing more student choice may inadvertently increase

HOW DISTRICTS CAN START TO IMPLEMENT STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING PRACTICES

School districts wishing to expand the use of student-centered learning practices to improve student achievement confront inevitable challenges in their efforts to shake up the status quo. Systems interested in starting with specialized programs or certain elements of student-centered learning, such as dual credit or virtual classrooms, must pay particular attention to organizational and policy issues that define these programs. Districts hoping to implement student-centered practices in all of their schools face far bigger hurdles. Changing the nature of teaching and learning in every classroom requires an unrelenting focus on reshaping the culture of schools and the daily practices of staff.⁸

Despite the greater difficulties involved with bringing about system-wide change compared to starting new programs, we do not argue for the superiority of one approach over another. We contend that a strong effort to implement student-centered learning approaches would require both. Comprehensive changes in daily teaching practice are needed to reach the majority of students in a district. However, establishing specialized schools or programs also plays an important role: New options can provide opportunities for particular groups of students whose needs otherwise are not being met. They can serve as a place for a district to start exploring student-centered strategies before making more comprehensive changes. The right mix for any given district depends on a variety of demographic and systemic factors, including population, geography,

facilities, resources, public support, and opportunities for partnerships with outside organizations.

Some other areas of district attention are not particular to either general strategy. For example, districts play an important role in creating public expectations and building public support for particular policies. Student-centered learning approaches can face challenges from parents and the public if they are seen as somehow detracting from traditional ideas about quality and standards in education, especially if evidence of effectiveness is absent or equivocal. However, those questions can arise whether the initiatives are programmatic or system-wide.

Our website review suggests that most school districts have developed one or more structural features that are designed to give greater latitude to some students (e.g., virtual schools or programs, small schools, career academies, theme schools, magnet schools, or other schools of choice; dual credit/early college model schools) or to provide different settings for students who may not like or succeed in mainstream schools (e.g., alternative programs or schools). As noted, many different kinds of programs fall under this heading. These options or programs do not necessarily embody principles of student-centered learning, even though choice among programs is a feature of student-centered learning approaches.

Some specialized programs may be more traditional pedagogically than mainstream schools. A study by Milbrey McLaughlin, Grace Atukpawu, and Devon



Districts hoping to implement student-centered practices in all of their schools face far bigger hurdles. Changing the nature of teaching and learning in every classroom requires an unrelenting focus on reshaping the culture of schools and the daily practices of staff.

Williamson (2008) of 850 alternative programs in California high schools shows that these programs, primarily intended for students who were failing or disruptive in regular schools, generally had poor success rates. School and district leaders saw these programs as places to send students who were deemed too challenging for mainstream schools. Nor were these programs innovative in their approaches to teaching and learning. They sometimes had the effect of allowing regular schools to avoid changing their practices, while not being particularly successful in serving these high-need students either.

DISTRICT POLICY ISSUES

Whatever their intent or type, specialized schools and programs are embedded in district policy frameworks and are often deeply affected by policy or administrative requirements from organizations outside the district. This means that their implementation depends both on policy and administrative choices of districts, as well as on those choices made in other organizations. Although this point may seem obvious, it brings very different kinds of requirements than is the case for changes discussed later that focus on daily practices in mainstream schools. These considerations operate both for individual programs and for an overall district mix or set of programs. They concern strategic elements about the range of programs, operational matters such as location and facilities, and accountability issues such as reporting. In practice, all of these decisions are related.

What range of alternative programs or settings is appropriate for a district? What proportion of students might be expected to enroll in these programs? Which students are thought to be most likely to benefit from these programs? How do these programs relate to existing outcomes and equity gaps in the district? To the extent that alternative programs are aimed primarily at particular kinds of students, they may end up having exclusionary effects, such as in the McLaughlin et al. study (2008). Or programs may target students who are already successful, as sometimes happens with virtual programs.

What range of program models or types should be included? Consider the wide range of possibilities, from charter schools to virtual schools to continuation schools to dual enrollment programs to a whole range of specific school models. What is the rationale for each choice and for the range of choices overall? It would appear—though we do not have good evidence on this point—that few districts have an overall strategy for alternatives; instead, they adopt them one at a time as someone thinks that a particular model is a good idea or perhaps as there are pressures to adopt certain programs. In other cases, programs are mandated by states, as noted in the California example. This issue is also affected by district size; small districts will be more limited in the range of programs they can accommodate.

How are alternative programs positioned in terms of public communication? What are students, parents, and community leaders told about the nature and purposes of these programs? How are they described in terms of a district's overall approach and strategy for education?

What is the evidence base for each alternative? It is well known that education has a tendency to adopt program ideas and models based on some intuitive appeal rather than on evidence of effectiveness (Leithwood 2008). Presumably, districts should assess the evidence before making program choices, yet there is good reason to think that this is rarely done. For example, small high schools were widely adopted until a Gates Foundation-funded evaluation found that they had little impact on outcomes (American Institutes for Research & SRI International 2006). Cyber schools are popular, though there is little or no evidence of their outcomes compared with other alternatives. Moreover, even where there is evidence of program outcomes, there is rarely a connection to relative costs, so the comparative impact of various options is not established.

What will be the size and scope of each program? What number or proportion of students would potentially benefit from a particular program? An important choice is whether these programs are minor aspects of overall district provision or are, individually or collectively, seen as a major part of that provision. In most districts, alternative programs serve only small numbers of students, but some

districts have a clear intent to make alternative provisions available to many, if not most, students through various forms of magnet or pilot schools.

Which students will be eligible, or required, to participate? How will eligibility be determined in individual cases? Will the program(s) serve all students deemed eligible, or will admission be limited and therefore competitive in some way? What range of choice will students and parents have in deciding where to enroll compared to the staff's power to place students. In practice, even where programs are deemed to be student choice, students may be pushed in or out of various alternatives by the system. Where there is more demand than space, there is a natural tendency to "cream" the best students, thus working against overall program purposes.

What are the implications of alternative programs for mainstream programs? Will mainstream programs be able to "send" students to alternatives? Will they have to worry about losing students in competition with alternatives? These decisions have much to do with the degree of support that mainstream schools offer to alternatives. In some cases, districts are using alternatives to experiment with a view to using the results more broadly. In other cases, alternative programs can act as safety valves for not changing mainstream programs. For example, if there is a virtual school or independent learning school, regular high schools may feel less need to try accommodating to students who want more independent learning. Alternative programs can therefore work for or against wider adoption of student-centered practices in a district.

Where will programs be located geographically within the district? How is this location related to the presumed clientele?

Will programs have independent facilities or be housed within another facility?

How independent will the programs be? Will each have its own identity, administration, and budget?

Or will some or all of these be controlled by another school or program?

How will the programs be resourced? What level of funding and other resources will be provided, and how will this compare to mainstream schools? Will resourcing be per student, related to student need, or some combination thereof? As is evident in the charter school movement, the degree of resourcing is important especially for what might be called start-up programs. However, as noted, if other schools see alternatives as taking resources away, there may be bitter feelings and lack of cooperation. For example, regular schools may work to discourage students from enrolling in alternative programs.

How will the programs be staffed? Will staff volunteer or be assigned? If the latter, assigned on what basis? Since quality of teaching is so critical to program success, the issue of which teachers staff which programs, both within and across schools, is vital, yet as W. Norton Grubb (2008) points out, few schools or systems pay careful attention to staffing from this perspective.

How will alternative programs report administratively? Through area administrators? Though a dedicated senior leader for alternative programs? If alternatives are not the clear responsibility of someone senior, they risk being seen as trivial sidelines. On the other hand, if all alternatives are separated organizationally, the risk is that the rest of the system will largely ignore them. The best option seems to be some kind of hybrid organization in which alternative programs have someone senior to advocate on their behalf within the district, but also are seen as part of the responsibility of all leaders in the district.

What will be the measures of success for these programs? Will they be the same as for mainstream schools? What will be the consequences if programs are not successful (in whatever way that is defined)? Insofar as alternative programs deal with more



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challenging students, or are intended to have a different and broader vision or goals, judging them by the usual standards of test performance may militate against their success (as it often does for mainstream schools).

It should be evident that the choices districts make will have very powerful effects on the nature of programming and how alternatives develop. We would argue that districts can play an important role in shaping the overall provision of various options to respond to varying needs and demands in their communities, something that would not necessarily be the case in a system in which each school can choose for itself.

Though important, these considerations are specific to efforts by districts to create or expand programmatic vehicles such as virtual schools or alternative schools. They do not apply to efforts to change standard practices across a district. That is why we argue that program models carry a very different set of implications for school districts. There is equally no right answer to these questions; they are all a matter of judgment based on an analysis of overall student needs within a particular district.

Also, as is evident in the McLaughlin, Atupawu, and Williamson (2008) study, many programs require or would at least benefit from stronger community connections. In some cases, this means linking with social services to integrate supports for students. A consideration of all the issues involved in such connections is beyond the scope of this paper. But it can be said that, although integrated services has long been a goal, it has proved extraordinarily difficult to bring about and sustain in practice. Community connections of any kind, whether through social services or through closer relationships with community groups, such as ethnic or religious organizations, do require attention and resources, and inevitably involve the district in some way—even if they are largely created and sustained by individual schools.

STATE POLICY ISSUES

Even after this long list of internal considerations, districts face a further set of issues around specialized programs that lie outside their purview.

Many of these will relate to state education policies, but they may also arise from other state agencies (e.g., around human rights requirements) or from federal rules (e.g., around NCLB). Among other state-level policies, a district establishing innovative programs or structures must also consider:

Graduation requirements: What are the state rules around the requirements for students to graduate? How do these rules constrain innovative options? For example, if completion of a course requires attendance, it may be more difficult to operate virtual or independent learning programs.

Legal requirements: What state mandates either require or inhibit various kinds of programs? For example, some governing bodies require schools to provide programming to students based on their achievement levels (e.g., students identified as underperforming or high performing). There may be restrictions rooted in state or district funding formulas.

Accountability provisions: How will state requirements regarding testing, federal requirements regarding Adequate Yearly Progress, or other accountability measures affect various program options?

Funding provisions: What state rules relate to funding of students and how might these affect alternatives? For example, there may be rules around attendance as required for funding, or around part-time versus full-time enrollment.

Equity considerations: Civil rights or special education policies may affect the district's ability to create programs for particular equity groups. For example, the issue of whether alternative programs are attended primarily by minority or majority groups can be contentious.

CHANGING DAILY PRACTICES DISTRICTWIDE

While some aspects of student-centered learning seem to call for separate programs, others are appropriate for or even needed in all or virtually all schools and classrooms in a system. Indeed, it would seem odd to talk about student-centered learning as something that exists only in some programs

or schools. However, changing daily teaching and learning practices in all classrooms and schools is a very different kind of administrative or leadership task than is the establishment of innovative programs. It is particularly difficult to create change in high schools because of the inherent difficulties of changing high schools in any way, though it is important because of the critical work high schools do.



series

Related Paper in the *Student at the Center Series*⁹

Personalization in Schools, by Susan Yonezawa, Larry McClure, and Makeba Jones

Keeping these substantial challenges in mind, we can turn our attention to what districts can do to encourage and support more effective practices in all schools. These requirements line up very closely with the elements outlined in the first part of this paper. They involve creating a focus, setting goals, supporting collective learning by teachers, using data to guide further improvement, building instructional leadership, and so on. They address both the specific practices necessary in classrooms (e.g., increasing student engagement; building in principles of formative assessment) and also the organizational practices needed to support these (e.g., collective learning by the adults; constant two-way communication) (Levin 2008).

While these practices have now been described in the literature for some years, writing them down is much easier than putting them into practice, as evidenced by the fact that they continue to be the exception when one looks at the operations of real school districts. The barriers to making more districts effective in this way include:

Lack of clarity: Teaching is an intensely practical activity; if people do not see how it works in their daily practice, they will not do it. Some elements of student-centered learning, such as connecting with students' interests and lives outside the school, or building on students' previous knowledge, require

much more operational specificity for teachers to use them. Yet, as noted, school systems are generally reluctant to be prescriptive about teaching practice unless it is linked to accountability measures, which has its own drawbacks.

Lack of understanding: People in leadership roles in many districts may simply be unfamiliar with the model of effectiveness described in this paper and so are not able to define or implement it.

Lack of skill: Although there may be support for these ideas, in many school districts the senior leaders simply do not know how to do them. Many of these practices are very different from typical school district operations and require skill sets that people do not have and have no means of acquiring.

Leadership turnover: Much work about schooling points to the problem of rapid turnover in superintendents (Alsbury 2008). New superintendents tend to arrive with new agendas, leading to churn in priorities and little lasting implementation of any. The same is true if there is frequent change in leadership at the school level, which is one reason why sustained districtwide commitment is important.

Competing pressures: One of the most difficult challenges for any organization is focusing on its goals. This may seem counterintuitive, but quite a bit of literature in organization theory (e.g., Tavris & Aronson 2007) shows that though organizations may espouse particular goals, their actual behavior is something quite different. It is also true in human psychology. Chris Argyris and Donald Schon (1978), among others, have demonstrated that people often do not behave in accordance with the values and priorities they espouse. This is usually because people and organizations are subject to multiple pressures and influences that pull them in contradictory directions. For example, school districts are under enormous pressure to meet NCLB requirements, with serious sanctions for failing to do so. Whatever their commitments to student-centered practices, these are



Changing daily teaching and learning practices in all classrooms and schools is a very different kind of administrative or leadership task than is the establishment of innovative programs.



A system-wide approach cannot rest on picking one or two initiatives and introducing them; it must focus instead on sustained change in many places over time, which is much harder to bring about and to maintain.

likely to get pushed back if they conflict with what is thought to be needed in regard to NCLB. The same would be true of other state or federal requirements.

POLITICS

Achievement of goals is also deeply affected by political forces at both the macro and micro levels. At the macro level, as noted earlier, communities or groups within communities may be quite resistant to changes in practice even when those changes are well grounded in evidence (Stanovich & West 2008). For example, retention in grade continues to have broad public support, and even significant professional support despite a century of evidence that it is ineffective (Hattie 2008; Jimerson 2009). Some of the elements of student-centered learning are likely to run up against this kind of public opposition. At the micro level, organizations can be rife with disputes about which groups or individuals will see their status rise or fall, about the assignment of responsibilities to particular individuals, and about ego issues, all of which can interfere with goal achievement and change initiatives (Tavris & Aronson 2007). It takes skillful and determined leadership, with much persistence, to overcome these factors.

These barriers reinforce the importance of the practices described for effective districts and suggest that these would be highly relevant to efforts to introduce student-centered practices across all schools. In particular they draw our attention to the importance of persistence with strong leadership. A system-wide approach cannot rest on picking one or two initiatives and introducing them; it must focus instead on sustained change in many places over time,

which is much harder to bring about and to maintain. If new school board members with new agendas are elected, or if a new superintendent arrives with a new agenda, there is little likelihood that student-centered learning practices can be maintained.

Similarly, a system-change strategy draws attention to the importance of aligned and persistent professional development of staff, so that people have many opportunities to become comfortable with and skilled at new practices.

Alignment of efforts across an organization is also crucial. Approaches related to student-centered learning will not work if they are inconsistent with budgeting, evaluation, accountability, or human resource policies. It is hard for student-centered learning approaches to work in an environment in which all the focus is on state test achievement. Similarly, if the district puts more emphasis on on-time submission of transportation reports than it does on teaching practice, the former will displace the latter in the work of schools. Creating this kind of alignment across an entire organization—and in particular subordinating operational and administrative processes to educational priorities—is a huge challenge in most school districts.

Finally, the district has an important facilitating and buffering role in relating its schools to the community, state, and national context. Districts must protect schools from unwanted intrusions into their work to be sure that the declared priorities remain the real priorities. Skilled district leaders do this work well, just as skilled principals do within their schools. But in many settings, external requirements are allowed to take precedence over the real work of education, with predictably unfortunate results.



The district has an important facilitating and buffering role in relating its schools to the community, state, and national context. Districts must protect schools from unwanted intrusions into their work to be sure that the declared priorities remain the real priorities.

CONCLUSION

Our goal in this paper has been to explore the system role in supporting student-centered learning practices. We have tried to underscore the point that districts need to be significant players in efforts to implement these approaches—otherwise they cannot succeed. Through our review of research, we have demonstrated the ways in which districts can both facilitate and hinder educational reform efforts. Our aim here is to show that there are indeed challenges ahead for districts moving toward student-centered learning, but being knowledgeable about them at the outset will aid in the change effort.

In sum, our analysis of the possibilities and challenges of moving districts toward student-centered learning yields four conclusions for the expansion of student-centered learning approaches:

- > School districts and CMOs will play a vital role in the diffusion and adoption of student-centered practices. It is highly unlikely that these practices can come into wide use without the active support of school districts. This means that advocates of student-centered learning need to give specific attention to the role of districts in advancing this work. Focusing simply on school programs is unlikely to yield change at the desired scale or with sustainability.
- > The development of student-centered practices will be more effective if school districts consider these practices as strategic activities across the

district rather than focus on one-at-a-time policy or program choices. The latter approach reaches fewer students and is less sustainable, yet has been the dominant mode of operation in most places.

- > Districts should consider the full range of student-centered learning possibilities and also give careful thought to the ways in which those choices and activities are either fostered or impeded by district policies, practices, and priorities as well as by the beliefs of staff, parents, and students.
- > A strong student-centered learning agenda would probably have some combination of special programs or schools and efforts to change practices in all schools and for all students. Focusing only on innovative or special programs seems likely to leave most students unaffected. However, this approach may be a way to start in a district that is not ready for broader change, and such programs will often be good alternatives for some students. In other words, there is room for, and probably a need for, both approaches.

Advocates for and supporters of student-centered approaches to learning, then, should consider the role of districts, pay attention to a strategic approach, work on ways of reaching most if not all students, and consider how to create sufficient will and capacity to make student-centered learning a real feature of the entire system.



There are indeed challenges ahead for districts moving toward student-centered learning, but being knowledgeable about them at the outset will aid in the change effort.

ENDNOTES

¹ See series paper: <http://www.studentsatthecenter.org/papers/teachers-work>

² See series paper: <http://www.studentsatthecenter.org/papers/literacy-practices>

³ For more information, see series paper *Personalization in Schools*, by Susan Yonezawa, Larry McClure, and Makeba Jones. <http://www.studentsatthecenter.org/papers/personalization-schools>

⁴ See series paper: <http://www.studentsatthecenter.org/papers/assessing-learning>

⁵ Here we use “The Student-Centered Landscape: What, When, Where, Who, How and How Do We Know,” which Jobs for the Future prepared for *Building the Knowledge Base of Student-Centered Learning*, a concept paper.

⁶ Here we use “Defining Student-Centered Learning,” which Jobs for the Future prepared for *Building the Knowledge Base of Student-Centered Learning*, a concept paper.

⁷ See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2xQ2BmlzhQ&lr=1>

⁸ Certainly these two approaches to implementation of student-centered learning are not mutually exclusive. Whatever the policy and administrative requirements, specialized programs also need to pay attention to daily teaching and learning practices. Similarly, although the main work of changing daily teaching and learning is more a matter of culture than of policy or administration, these efforts also are affected by policy and administrative choices. The issue is one of primacy rather than exclusivity. For new program structures to be successful, the right policy environment is necessary; for daily school practices to change, the right culture is necessary.

⁹ See series paper: <http://www.studentsatthecenter.org/papers/personalization-schools>

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TEL 617.728.4446 FAX 617.728.4857 info@jff.org

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