

**Cases in
Public Education
Leadership**

**Managing
School Districts**
for High Performance

Editors

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All case studies in this book were developed solely
as the basis for class discussion.

Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements,
sources of primary data, or illustrations of
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Introduction

This course book is intended to be used by current and future public school district leaders. It addresses the challenges they face as they work to ensure that all students have rich learning opportunities and achieve at high levels throughout a system of schools. Pockets of excellence exist in all school districts—spectacular classes in otherwise dreary schools and stunning schools in mediocre districts. However, to truly serve all students and meet the demands of the new accountability environment, leaders at all levels of a school district must find a way for such pockets of excellence to become the norm, rather than the exception, throughout their organization.

The work of school and district leaders has changed dramatically and rapidly, due to the demands of external accountability, including standards-based reforms at the state level and the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. In the past, public educators valued well-intentioned efforts and lauded heroic leaders who were visible, active, and worked tirelessly on behalf of students and schools. But new public expectations now require them to be responsible for results, not simply appearances or best efforts.

This shift of attention to the learning outcomes of all students means that responsibility for better teaching and learning must be shared widely. School districts are complicated organizations, and they rarely improve in response to simple mandates that call for uniform compliance. If reforms are to work, they must be carefully adapted for each community, school, and

classroom. Because everyone has a role to play in improving the academic performance of all students, leadership must be distributed throughout the district.¹ However, for distributed leadership to be effective, teachers, principals, central office administrators, school board members, and teachers union leaders must understand the nested nature of school organizations.

The most important work in a district happens in classrooms, where teachers work with their students to master challenging academic content. However, the classroom does not stand alone. It is nested within a school, where teachers must collaborate and coordinate their curriculum and teaching so that students experience a coherent academic program over time. Schools, in turn, are nested within districts, which are uniquely positioned to ensure equity and to increase the capacity of all schools—not just some—to succeed. Educators in all roles need to understand how to work productively across the various levels of this nested system so that they can achieve excellent results for all students. They need to anticipate how their decisions will affect their colleagues' work and what their actions ultimately mean for student learning.

Just when requirements for high academic performance are increasing, large numbers of principals and superintendents have begun to retire, creating a demand for new, skilled, and committed leaders. This opens public education to the next generation of school and district leaders, who are eager to learn new strategies for

achieving high-quality outcomes for all students. This book is designed to prepare them for these challenges.

The PELP Coherence Framework

The concept of organizational coherence is at the center of this book. Basically, organizational coherence means that the various parts of a school district are designed so that they work in sync with one another to achieve district goals. This concept grew out of our work with the Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University (PELP), a collaboration among faculty members at Harvard's graduate schools of business and education in partnership with a network of urban school districts. Through this project, we identified five common managerial challenges that urban districts face as they seek to implement a strategy for improving performance:

1. Implementing the strategy effectively across schools with different characteristics
2. Redesigning the organization so that it supports the strategy
3. Developing and managing human capital to carry out the strategy
4. Allocating resources in alignment with the strategy
5. Using performance data for decision making, organizational learning, and accountability

The district leaders we talked with, however, tended to see each of the five challenges as a separate problem rather than as related parts of a larger problem or solution. For example, effectively developing teachers' skills involves using timely, detailed, student performance data to highlight areas where teachers need to change or improve their instructional techniques. Similarly, allocating resources in ways that are aligned with students' specific learning needs is essential to

ensure that a strategy can be implemented in meaningful ways in different sorts of schools.

Rather than focusing our research and case-writing on these separate challenges, we developed the PELP Coherence Framework (PCF) to help leaders recognize the interdependence of various aspects of their school district—its culture, systems and structures, resources, stakeholder relationships, and environment—and to understand how they reinforce one another to support the implementation of an improvement strategy. The framework helps leaders use organizational design, human capital management, resource allocation, and accountability and performance improvement systems in coherent ways so that they can implement their strategy. This book brings together more than twenty of the cases and readings we developed over four years to illustrate these ideas.

The framework has roots in what business has taught us about organizational alignment. However, that knowledge has been elaborated by what we know about reform in education. Throughout its development, the framework has been informed by our interactions with senior leaders of large urban districts who face unique managerial challenges because of the size and complexity of their school systems, and often because of the poverty of the communities they serve as well. Putting a districtwide strategy into practice requires building a coherent organization that connects to teachers' work in classrooms and enables people at all levels to carry out their part of the strategy. The framework identifies the organizational elements critical to high performance and poses a series of diagnostic questions about each element, all in an effort to bring them into coherence with the strategy and with each other. The elements of the framework are the instructional core, strategy, culture, structure, systems, resources, stakeholder relationships, and the environment.

Strategy and the Instructional Core: At the center of the framework is the instructional core,

PELP Coherence Framework



which represents the critical work of teaching and learning that goes on in classrooms. The core includes three interdependent components: teachers' knowledge and skill, students' engagement in their own learning, and academically challenging content.² Surrounding the instructional core is strategy—the set of actions a district deliberately undertakes to strengthen the instructional core with the objective of increasing student learning and performance districtwide. In order to make teaching and learning more effective, a district's improvement strategy must articulate how it will strengthen and support the instructional core through integrated activities that increase teachers' knowledge and skill, change the students' role in the teaching and learning process, and ensure that curriculum is aligned with benchmarks for performance. However, *how* each district strengthens and supports the core may vary. In other words, two districts may design very different but equally effective strategies. The PELP Coherence Framework, rather than prescribing a particular strategy, asserts that organizational co-

herence at the district, school, and classroom levels will make a district's chosen approach more effective and sustainable.

Most other organizational decisions, resources, and activities should be directed toward supporting the district's strategy to make the core more powerful and effective. The other elements of the framework are aspects of the organization that must be brought into coherence with the strategy and each other.

Culture: Culture

consists of the norms and behaviors in an organization; in other words, everyone's shared understanding of "how things work around here." Culture, whether strong or weak, does not change readily in response to edicts or slogans. Rather, it is reshaped gradually by changes in many individuals' practices and beliefs. When district leaders take specific actions, such as redefining roles or relationships, altering performance expectations, or using job assignments in creative ways, they send signals about which behaviors they value and desire throughout the organization. Over time they can upend an entrenched counterproductive culture and see it replaced by a productive one.

The public education sector has long had a culture that valued effort—or the appearance of effort—more than results. As long as people seemed to be working hard, they could go about their business without being asked to work with colleagues or to be accountable for their students' performance. At its worst, this type of culture can lead to defeatism among teachers and administrators ("I taught it, but they didn't learn it"). In today's accountability environment, how-

ever, successful districts must develop a culture of collaboration, high expectations, and accountability throughout their schools.

Structure: Structure includes how people are organized, who has responsibility and accountability for results, and who makes or influences decisions. Districts usually develop their organizational structures haphazardly to support generation after generation of reform efforts, and then leave them in place long after the reform fad they were built for has passed from the scene. As a result, a district's structure often constrains rather than enables high performance and must be reinvented to support the implementation of an improvement strategy.

Systems: School districts manage themselves through a variety of important systems. In the same way that circulatory and nervous systems perform vital processes inside the skeletal structure of living organisms, an organization's systems provide the means by which important work flows through its structure. Some systems are formally designed by the district, while others emerge informally through practice. Whether formal or informal, the purpose of systems is to increase the district's efficiency and effectiveness in implementing strategy.

Systems are built around such important functions as career development and promotion, compensation, student assignment, resource allocation, organizational learning, and measurement and accountability. Effective systems are even-handed and efficient, eliminating the need for individuals to "reinvent the wheel" or "know the right people" to get important things done.

Resources: Money is usually the first thing leaders think about when resources are mentioned, and money is obviously important. But organizational resources also include people, time, and other assets such as technology and data. District leaders must allocate the full range of resources in ways that are coherent with the district's strategy if it is to be implemented effec-

tively. This means being disciplined about which current and planned activities receive necessary resources and, just as importantly, which do not. Because district resources are usually quite constrained, freeing up the resources necessary to fully invest in activities that are crucial to and coherent with the strategy usually means cutting off the flow to others.

Stakeholder Relationships: Stakeholders are people and groups inside and outside the organization who have a legitimate interest in the schools and can influence the success of the district's strategy. These include teachers unions, parents, students, school boards, community and advocacy groups, and local politicians and policymakers. Conducting and managing stakeholder relationships in a way that is coherent with the strategy is especially challenging because stakeholders often disagree about what success looks like or how to achieve it. However, effective strategies are informed by the views and priorities of such groups. In moving ahead, district leaders must either persuade a majority of stakeholder groups about the wisdom of their strategy or build a sufficient alliance among some that will prevent the others from becoming a disruptive force.

Environment: A school district's environment includes all of the external factors that can have an impact on strategy, operations, and performance. The environment in which public school districts operate is especially complex and dynamic, including the various funding sources available (both public and private); the political and policy contexts at the city, state, and national levels; the collective bargaining arrangements that are in place; and the characteristics of the particular community.

While district leaders have little direct control over the environment, they must spend significant time trying to manage its effects in order to consistently implement a districtwide strategy. The environment can affect a school system by enforcing nonnegotiable demands, constraining

decisionmaking, reducing resources, evaluating performance, and imposing sanctions. However, the environment can also serve as an enabler if district leaders can promote an understanding of the schools' needs and thus influence the regulatory and statutory, contractual, financial, and political forces that surround them.

Content and Organization of This Volume

This book is organized into five modules that contain cases about leaders in real organizations working on real performance problems. Most of the modules begin with a case about a private-sector company or nonprofit organization that introduces the ideas presented in the module. Our extensive use of these cases shows that introducing a new concept in a noneducation setting and then exploring the same ideas more deeply through relevant cases based in public school districts is a powerful learning combination.

Each module has its own set of learning objectives, and all five modules fit together to explore overall concepts of strategy and coherence, as well as more specific areas such as human resource management and accountability. Every module has a set of questions to consider as you read and discuss all of the pieces, and each case within a module has its own set of discussion questions to help guide your preparation. Your instructor will assign work in each module to support an overarching set of course goals.

- *Module I* introduces the concepts of strategy and coherence through a series of cases and a conceptual note. This content sets the stage for the remaining modules in the book.
- *Module II* addresses the importance of strategic human resource management in building a high-performing district. The cases in this module explore the elements of a sound human resource system, including ways of recruiting and hiring people and developing

their skills in order to support a district's strategy for improving student learning.

- *Module III* takes up the challenge of becoming a results-oriented organization through cases that illustrate using performance data for accountability and learning, creating a performance-based compensation system, and building and managing a strong organizational culture in order to enhance district performance.
- *Module IV* highlights the difficulty of implementing a strategy consistently across a number of schools that are different from one another. It also offers a set of cases that demonstrate some emerging approaches currently underway in organizations dealing with this challenge.
- *Module V* offers the opportunity to put together all of the ideas in the first four modules by exploring two districts that have had relative success over a number of years but are now faced with trying to sustain and accelerate their student learning outcomes.

Learning and the Case Method

For many, learning by the case method is a new experience. Rather than having participants encounter abstract theories or research findings, this approach immerses them in real-world situations. Each case has been chosen or written because it illustrates important problems, practices, or concepts. In reading and discussing a case in the context of these larger ideas, participants can see the relationship between theory and practice. Importantly, the participants who read and discuss a case are not asked to be interested bystanders but are challenged to diagnose the situation the case presents and propose a course of action as if they were the protagonist. Since many cases hinge on an important decision that must be made, participants have the opportunity to develop an approach that is consistent both with the facts of the case and with the larger

concepts or theories it illustrates and to test out that approach with others.

Unlike the case studies that are included in many textbooks on school administration, these cases are not meant to be examples of either best or worst practice. Many include some promising practices, but none should be seen as a template to be taken and applied to another setting. Like the real world they come from, the cases often are messy, with irrational people and unexpected complications. Thus, thinking like a leader or manager in one of these cases requires coping with the limitations and realities of everyday life in organizations, diagnosing what works well, what does not, and what a real leader in a real district might do about it. As a group, the cases and readings are designed to help students build a habit of mind of thinking coherently about district strategy and organization.

It is important to leave yourself plenty of time to prepare for a case discussion. Each case includes discussion questions to serve as guides for your analysis. Good preparation typically requires reading the case several times. First, one might read to understand the central issue, the actors, and the chronology of events. One might then examine the materials in the appendix to see how they are relevant to the events of and decisions made in the case. Next it would be important to read the case again, focusing this time on the decision or action that is called for. You may find it helpful to discuss your ideas about the case with a small group of colleagues (a study group) before the in-class case discussion. This allows participants to verify their understanding of the facts of the case and to give their proposals for action a trial run in a small setting.

In class discussions, the participant is a member of a learning community that works together to examine the facts, consider the underlying concepts, and explore and assess alternative actions. Finding the “right” answer or “cracking the case” is not the goal of a good case discussion, since there is little to be learned through

such an approach. Rather, the goal is to practice informed diagnosis, thoughtful planning, and critical reflection on what works and why.

The piece that follows is a well-regarded introduction to learning by the case method that has been used for decades at the Harvard Business School to help orient new graduate students and executive education participants to the pedagogy. Rather than invent our own introduction, we adapted this classic slightly for use by current and future school system leaders and included it in this volume to help them get off to a good start. Our hope is that our readers will find it useful as they begin their journey into the case method.

Notes

1. J. P. Spillane, “State and Local Government Relations in the Era of Standards-Based Reform: Standards, State Policy Instruments, and Local Instructional Policy-making,” *Educational Policy* 13 (1999); Richard F. Elmore, “Building a New Structure for School Leadership,” Washington, DC: Albert Shanker Institute, 2000.
2. David K. Cohen and Deborah Loewenberg Ball, “Instruction, Capacity, and Improvement,” CPRE Research Report Series RR-43, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 1999.