

## CENTRAL OFFICE TRANSFORMATION TOOLKIT

# Readiness Assessment:

## Finding Your Starting Points for Central Office Transformation<sup>1</sup>

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### About the Readiness Assessment

If you are exploring this tool, that means you have at least begun to consider how research and experience on central office performance might help *your district central office* strengthen how it supports improved teaching and learning for all your students. To be sure, realizing such results for students takes significant capacity-building at the school level. Such capacity-building, at a minimum, must help each and every teacher perform in ways that help students learn to high levels and that support principals in their growth as instructional leaders — that is, in leading to strengthen the quality of teaching in all their classrooms. Central offices have vital roles to play in proactively helping principals and teachers build such capacity. Research and experience underscore this vital role for school district central offices in supporting schools' success at scale. This body of work highlights that central offices that build their own capacity for such leadership engage in what we call “central office transformation.”

Transforming your central office in service of improved teaching and learning throughout your district means more than making some changes in your organizational chart, adding or eliminating units, or improving the efficiency of your long-standing operations. Instead, central office transformation demands looking deeply at the current work of each and every central office staff person and asking: To what extent can we show that work matters to improving teaching and working districtwide? And if it does not, how can we change how we work to improve the alignment between our core work and real results for students? In districts the researchers observed, nearly all of the central office staff were working to realign daily activities with the ultimate goal of improving teaching and learning.

Whether you work in a district with a handful of central office staff members or a big city school district, such change isn't easy and involves many parts. The work will unfold over time, probably with various fits and starts. But where should you begin?

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<sup>1</sup> Suggested citation: Honig, M.I., Silverman, M., & Associates. Readiness Assessment: Finding Your Starting Points for Central Office Transformation, Version 1.0. Seattle, WA: The University of Washington School of Education.

### Research-Based Tools for Central Office Transformation

The tools in this kit were created by the Center for Educational Leadership and Meredith I. Honig, Associate Professor of Education, at the University of Washington. They are based on a ground-breaking study, conducted by Honig and colleagues at the University of Washington, on how three school district central offices undertook to radically transform their central office into a true teaching and learning support system. That study, *Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement*, funded by the Wallace Foundation, investigated central office transformation efforts in three urban districts. These findings have since been confirmed and elaborated by a follow-up study, conducted by Honig and colleagues, involving six additional districts of varying sizes. In designing the tools we also drew on our direct experience helping districts of various sizes across the country get started with central office transformation.

**What this tool will help you do.** We have developed this assessment tool to help you identify starting places for central office transformation that might be particularly productive in your district. The tool does not tell you the perfect, fool-proof starting place. Rather, this assessment guides you through a series of questions to generate information you can use in discussions with key players in your district to help you identify first phases of your central office transformation process based on particular considerations such as ease or urgency.

We developed this assessment from research on central office performance and our experience helping districts of all sizes use that research to launch central office transformation efforts. The assessment is organized around three core ideas that research has shown are fundamental to improved central office performance:

1. Learning-focused partnerships with principals to help them grow as instructional leaders.
2. The provision of high-quality, relevant, differentiated services to schools in support of improved teaching and learning districtwide.
3. Leadership that takes a teaching and learning stance — leadership that helps staff throughout the system learn to lead improvements in their work and the work of others and that continuously learns from the process how to improve their own leadership.

The tool guides you through a series of statements about the extent to which your current central office functions in the ways the central office transformation research suggests. In our experience, most districts do not yet function in most of those ways. But by taking a close, honest look at the similarities and differences between your current work practices and those involved with central office transformation, you deepen your understanding of central office transformation and begin to pinpoint areas where you might most productively start.

**Who should use this tool?** This tool assumes that the transformation process begins with the superintendent and his/her executive team who serve as executive sponsors of the work. We recommend the superintendent and executive team complete the assessment first to generate some initial priorities and also to familiarize themselves with the tool. Then, identify any other participants whose input would be helpful at their current stage of initiative development. Other possible participants include principals, teachers, and central office staff. In deciding on additional participants,

consider whose input will make this assessment process more inclusive and informative and whose participation you want to foster early in your transformation work.

**How to use this tool.** The following are some suggested steps for completing the tool, based on our experience with processes that have worked well for districts of various sizes.

1. Spend some time, individually and as an executive leadership team, familiarizing yourselves with the research and experience on central office transformation. For example, you might read and discuss the original central office transformation research report or other articles or publications derived from that work. (For a list and copies, please see <http://education.washington.edu/areas/edlps/profiles/faculty/honig.html>.) However you do it, engagement in the core ideas of central office transformation will help participants better understand what the assessment items are asking. But you may complete the assessment at any time. The assessment is not a quiz of your knowledge of central office transformation, which will necessarily grow over time. Rather, the assessment reflects your current thinking about where your district stands on main dimensions of central office transformation, as best you understand them now.

2. Then, allocate adequate time for the assessment. You may want to complete the assessment all together in the meeting or individually and reconvene to discuss results. Consider whether you simply want participants to complete the assessment and share their results aloud or whether some tabulation of all results may be useful.

3. Reflect on and discuss results. At the end of each section of the assessment we suggest reflection/discussion questions. For example, we prompt you to consider: Which of the issues addressed in this tool rises to the top for you as a starting point for your work? We recommend prioritizing starting points with which you can achieve clear gains quickly, to help generate confidence in the reform. You might also prioritize areas of weakness that, if neglected at the outset, will jeopardize your efforts. We also prompt you to consider: What issues do you need to know more about before you act? What supports will you need to move people and practices toward the ready side of the scale in your key areas? Your answers to these questions will give you a set of next steps to move ahead. Feel free to revise those discussion questions to reflect how you think about prioritizing the work.

You may use this tool by itself or in tandem with other central office transformation tools in this set such as “Creating Your Theory of Action for Central Office Transformation” available through the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership. Some of the questions in this assessment will give you insight into issues that your theory of action will need to address. Conversely, working through your theory of action likely will also highlight areas where you need more preparation before launching into the full transformation process.

## ASSESSMENT PART 1:

## Learning-focused Partnerships

Central offices that support effective teaching at scale support all school principals in leading for such results, through roles for principals that some call “instructional leadership” or “strategic human capital management.” We have found that one effective way to increase supports for principals’ development as such leaders is to create learning-focused partnerships between principals and executive-level staff who help principals grow in that capacity. These central office staff, whom the research refers to as Instructional Leadership Directors (ILDs), dedicate the vast majority of their time to hands-on work with principals, one on one and in principal professional learning communities, with the express focus on helping principals develop as instructional leaders. In very small districts, central offices productively create an ILD function by having the superintendent and one or two other top-level administrators carve out significant time for such work. You may or may not already have staff in place whose job is to support principals. The questions below will help you take a deeper look at the scope of your current work in this area and compare it with what we have found about how learning-focused partnerships can support principal instructional leadership at scale.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	DK/NMI*
1. Our district has clearly defined the principalship as instructional leadership.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. That definition of the principalship as instructional leadership (referenced in question #1) informs all central office functions (e.g., principal hiring, evaluation, professional development, facilities).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. The relationship between principals and the central office in this district is a <i>partnership</i> relationship.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. We have central office staff dedicated to supporting the growth of all principals as instructional leaders.  <i>If you agree/strongly agree with question #4, please address #5-15. If you disagree/strongly disagree with question #4, skip to #16-21.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

\*DK/NMI = Don’t Know; Need More Information

Those Staff (referenced in question #4, above):	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	DK/NMI
5. Are in positions that sit on or report directly to the superintendent's cabinet or the equivalent.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Were hired for their orientation to the work of principal support as teaching as opposed to mainly supervision or evaluation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Are formally charged with spending at least 75% of their time working directly with principals on their professional growth as instructional leaders.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Actually spend at least 75% of their time working directly with principals on their professional growth as instructional leaders.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Have a low enough number of principals for whom they are responsible that they can be successful at helping all their principals grow as instructional leaders.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Have a strategic mix of principals necessary for building a strong principal professional learning community.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Actually approach their work with principals as teachers and learners rather than mainly supervisors or evaluators.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Have relationships with their principals around principals/professional growth as instructional leaders that are high in trust.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Receive professional development that helps them engage in their work as teachers and learners.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Have the support of the superintendent and other senior central office leaders who proactively protect their time for work on principals' growth as instructional leaders.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Are held accountable for helping principals grow as instructional leaders using specific, meaningful metrics of such performance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

<b>If you do not yet have staff dedicated to supporting the growth of all principals as instructional leaders (referenced in question #4):</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>DK/NMI</b>
16. The superintendent and other key central office leaders are aware of the need to have executive-level staff dedicated to supporting the growth of all principals as instructional leaders.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. Our district has staff in other positions who could serve well in these dedicated principal instructional leadership support positions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. Our district should be able to attract people to these positions who have the ready capacity to help principals grow as instructional leaders.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19. Our principals are open to having a central office staff person working with them as a partner to strengthen their instructional leadership practice.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. Key central office staff are aware of the need to provide professional development and protection of staff time to help these staff be successful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. Our principals are currently organized into subgroups whose composition can compromise a strong principal professional learning community.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Learning-Focused Partnerships: Reflections and Next Steps**

Which of the above issues rises to the top for you as a starting point for your work — because you can achieve clear gains in this area soon, because weakness in this area will jeopardize your broader effort, or because you otherwise believe that they relate to a key starting place for you?

What issues do you need to know more about before you can act?

What kinds of support will you need to move people and practices toward the “agree” side of the scale in your key areas?

**ASSESSMENT PART 2:****High-quality, Relevant, Differentiated Services**

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For the learning-focused partnerships to be successful, Instructional Leadership Directors and principals need the rest of the central office to function in ways that support the districtwide priority of helping all principals grow as instructional leaders. When districts move in this direction, they transform each of their functions. Every single function — from curriculum and instruction to human resources to buildings and grounds — shifts its orientation from compliance, crisis-management, or the oversight of funding streams to the provision of high-quality, relevant, differentiated services, those likely to help schools build their capacity for improved results for all students. In so doing, staff in each function shift their relationship with schools from a one-size-fits-all approach to the provision of differentiated services for schools — those strategically matched to schools’ needs and strengths. The central office transformation research calls such differentiation a *case management* approach to working with schools. Central office staff that are moving in this direction are turning away from operating in silos to creating new collaborative ways of working across traditional central office functions—an approach to work the research calls *project management*. Such districts also work ably with data to continuously improve their own performance in supporting schools — a process called *performance management*.

The questions below aim help you think about how each of your current central office units or functions operates in relation to this second set of core ideas involved with central office transformation: a service orientation involving case management, project management, and performance management.

For the most complete and useful assessment of where you stand, copy the following grid and answer its questions for every one of your central office units including: Accountability and Assessment, Budget, Curriculum and Instruction, Facilities, Human Resources, Nutrition, and Technology. Because central office transformation implicates each and every one of your central office staff members, the following grid is relevant to all units, even if you have not previously thought of them as centrally involved with improving teaching and learning.



Name of function/unit: _____	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	DK/NMI
1. This function/unit operates with a well-articulated theory of action meaningfully linking the work of each of its staff members to tangible improvements in principal instructional leadership and effective teaching in every classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Staff working in this unit/function:</b>					
2. Use a common, district-wide definition of high-quality teaching to inform their work.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Use a common, district-wide definition of the principalship as instructional leadership to inform their work.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Understand that their work primarily involves providing performance-oriented services to schools — services likely to help schools improve their capacity for high-quality teaching in every classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Actually provide services to schools differentiated by school staff members' capacity for high-quality teaching.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Routinely use data on each school's needs and strengths to inform and revisit which services they provide to schools.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Collaborate with staff <u>within the unit/function</u> to help improve the relevance and quality of services they provide to schools.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Collaborate with staff <u>in other units/functions</u> to help improve the relevance and quality of services they provide to schools.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Take an orientation to their work as problem solving.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Are held accountable for helping schools improve teaching and learning using specific, meaningful metrics of such performance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Receive regular, intentional professional development to help them be successful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**High-Quality, Relevant, Differentiated Services: Reflections and Next Steps**

Which of the above issues rises to the top for you as a starting point for your work — because you can achieve clear gains in this area soon, because weakness in this area will jeopardize your broader effort, or because you otherwise believe that they relate to a key starting place for you?

What issues do you need to know more about before you can act?

What kinds of support will you need to move people and practices toward the “agree” side of the scale in your key areas?

**ASSESSMENT PART 3:****Leading by Teaching and Learning, Communicating Change**

As the previous sections of this assessment make clear, the kinds of changes that central office transformation involves are a significant undertaking. Leading such efforts requires hands-on leadership by superintendents and other executive-level staff who actively sponsor the work. The research calls this form of leadership “leading as teaching and learning” because it involves leaders: teaching others throughout the central office how to engage in this work and continuously learning from the process how to strengthen their own leadership of the effort. For many executive-level staff, this form of leadership marks a shift from outward-facing or hands-off leadership to leadership that engages them deeply in the day-to-day work of their central office.

The questions below prompt each member of the executive team to reflect on their own leadership in relation to leadership as teaching and learning. We suggest each executive staff member answer the following questions with a focus on their own leadership. You may also want to adapt the questions so they inquire about the overall leadership of the executive team.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	DK/NMI
1. This district has a well-articulated theory of action that demonstrates how changes in the central office relate to improving the quality of teaching and learning district-wide.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>If you disagree or strongly disagree, please skip to #4.</i>					
2. All staff in this district are at least somewhat familiar with that theory of action.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. All staff in this district can see where their individual work fits in the theory of action.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your own leadership?</b>					
4. I measure my success based on the quality of the services I provide to schools rather than mainly other measures or the efficiency with which I relate to schools.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I spend substantial time each week helping other staff lead in ways that improve the quality of services the central office provides to schools.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I am prepared to shift where I focus my time from activities that do not meaningfully strengthen district-wide teaching and learning to those that do.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	DK/NMI
7. I am prepared to invest (funding, time, etc.) in the professional development of myself and my central office staff to grow our capacity to provide services that strengthen teaching and learning district-wide.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I understand that if I truly engage in central office transformation, chances are that not all my current staff will be suited for the new work.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Our school board members understand that improving teaching and learning should be the top priority of the central office.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### Leading by Teaching and Learning: Reflection and Next Steps

Which of the above issues rises to the top for you as a starting point for your work — because you can achieve clear gains in this area soon, because weakness in this area will jeopardize your broader effort, or because you otherwise believe that they relate to a key starting place for you?

What issues do you need to know more about before you can act?

What kinds of support will you need to move people and practices toward the “agree” side of the scale in your key areas?