Beyond the Policy Memo: Designing to Strengthen the Practice of District Central Office Leadership for Instructional Improvement at Scale

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This chapter argues for the importance of design-based leadership research (DBLR) for advancing the research and practice of educational leadership, with a focus on school district central offices. DBLR, like other design-based research, calls on researchers to develop designs for practice. Unlike other such research in education that calls for designs for classrooms, DBLR focuses on designs for leaders. Researchers working in this mode develop designs for leadership practice that reflect the latest knowledge about how leaders matter for improved student results; they work alongside leaders to use that knowledge to design and engage in new forms of their own practice consistent with the knowledge and appropriate to their settings. Participants study the process to feed new knowledge into the partnership sites and the field. This chapter elaborates how such research differs from traditional scholarship on district central offices and forms of action research. Challenges to conducting DBLR include focusing practitioners on central offices (especially in tough budget times), capturing central office practice in DBLR knowledge-building activities, and growing and sustaining the work. Early experience illuminates how to address those challenges and advance DBLR partnerships that promise to significantly strengthen leadership practice in support of improved results for all students.

In school districts across the country, central office staff members are working to improve how they lead district-wide instructional improvement, but are finding few guides or supports for that work, what design researchers might call limited "designs" for their leadership. Consider the following example.

In a Midwestern school district, the superintendent promoted a successful principal, Betty Greene, to a new high-level position, reporting directly to the superintendent's office. In that position, she and two colleagues are to help all district principals become better instructional leaders—principals who do not mainly manage their buildings, but work intensively with teachers to improve the quality of classroom instruction. Greene's new position represents a sea change for many school district central offices from their historical focus on business and regulatory functions to providing direct, intensive supports to schools to improve the quality of instruction across the district. Greene enthusiastically accepted the position. She believed she had expert knowledge of high-quality teaching and how principals could support it. She viewed the new post as an opportunity to take some of her own successful school-level leadership to scale across the district. However, once in her new post, she struggled. With no predecessor to consult with, she wondered, "I know my charge is to help principals become stronger instructional leaders, but what does that mean I actually do day-to-day to realize those results?" As a school principal, she had access to myriad professional development opportunities, such as workshops sponsored by the state, the district, and outside groups, as well as conferences and peer networking opportunities. While not all of those opportunities were high quality, Greene always took something away from them. But in the central office, she found professional development opportunities for staff virtually nonexistent. Three years into the post, she reflected, "I have been in a building for 30 years and building principal for 20. When I was principal, I regularly complained that central office staff were never in my building. I have been at this job for three years, but I am hardly ever in buildings myself. I don't know what to do when I'm there to help."

Greene's experience is not uncommon. Superintendents frequently elevate school-based staff to district-level leadership positions on the basis of their successes in schools, but those staff often find those positions only generally defined and minimally supported (Honig, 2006). This dynamic has become especially prevalent over the past ten years as school districts have begun to increase their engagement in instructional improvement. Such engagement marks a fundamental shift for school district central offices that traditionally have focused on basic business and regulatory functions, rather than helping schools build their capacity for providing high-quality instruction to all students (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010). As they assume more responsibility for leading instructional improvement, central office staff must shift their roles, often in fundamental ways. But, especially given the unprecedented nature of

the new roles, they, in effect, must design them while engaging in them, and often with little help. Look up "central office leadership practice," "professional development for central office staff," or similar terms on the Internet or in research search engines and virtually nothing comes up. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the general dearth of support for strengthening central office practice, studies of school district central office administrators leading district-wide teaching and learning improvement at scale generally describe disappointing results.

   But, what if Greene and other central office staff had access to designs or models of their practice that reflected the best of what research and experience teach about how their practice can contribute to improvements in teaching and learning in schools? Additionally, what if she and her colleagues had opportunities to partner with others who are expert in that knowledge and who could work side by side with them to incorporate the knowledge into their practice in ways appropriate to their settings? What if those partners, too, worked from the latest knowledge about how to assist leaders with changing their practice? And what if those partners continuously collected evidence from their experience working with district leaders to learn from their work and build further knowledge about promising leadership practice?

   This chapter explores those possibilities. Below, I first elaborate the gaps at the intersection of research and practice that the example of Principal Greene represents. I then argue that ideas about design-based research from the learning sciences, with some modifications appropriate to central office leadership practice, can help address these gaps. I call this approach to supporting such leaders "design-based leadership research." I discuss how this approach focuses centrally on how researchers can partner with school district leaders over time to help them design approaches to *their own* practice within central offices that promise to help them meet new policy demands and continuously learn from the process—to inform their own immediate work, but also the field of central office leadership. I describe conditions under which design-based leadership research is warranted and how it might be conducted at a high level of quality.

THE LIMITATIONS OF CENTRAL OFFICE PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

Several interrelated problems with both the practice and research of school district central offices point to the need for design-based leadership research. For one, central offices face unprecedented demands to lead for district-wide teaching and learning improvements that seem to far outstrip their capacity, suggesting the importance of focusing new attention on central office capacity building. For the better part of the

last century, federal and state policy skipped over school districts and directed resources and other attention directly on schools, or treated central offices as administrative and regulatory pass-throughs for state and federal funding. However, in the last 15 years, policies such as No Child Left Behind have cast district central offices as main agents of school improvement that are largely accountable for producing demonstrable gains in student achievement, including shrinking decades-old achievement gaps.

These demands require central office staff to engage in work that is counter-normative both for central offices as institutions and for central office administrators as professionals. This reality is an historical fact. School district central offices were set up at the turn of the last century mainly to handle basic business, fiscal, and regulatory functions and to manage burgeoning enrollments for the growing number of schools in urban areas. In rural areas, central offices formed largely to help raise revenue for typically cash-strapped schools (Cremin, 1990; Tyack, 1974). When they did get involved with teaching and learning matters, central offices generally focused on regulatory functions such as ensuring teaching candidates met state licensure requirements. In subsequent decades, federal and state governments largely passed over districts and focused funding and other resources directly on schools, often saying little about district roles in improvement processes. In this context, not surprisingly, central offices generally did not build their capacity in areas related to supporting schools in realizing the kinds of demonstrable student achievement gains federal and state policy now require. The end result is an institutional mismatch between what those policies demand and the capacity of central offices and their staff (Honig, in preparation).

Research provides few guides for central office leaders in overcoming this institutional mismatch. Mirroring policy inattention to central offices, researchers have barely focused on understanding the work of central offices. Traditionally, the few researchers who studied district central offices examined the effects of districts on schools by distilling district effects to a handful of variables that they regressed against various school outcomes. More recently, many qualitative and mixed-methods studies, even those that ostensibly focus on school district central offices, refer generally to the actions of "the district" in school improvement efforts. Some of these studies report their findings in terms of broad categories of district action such as "leadership," "vision," or "policy alignment" that they argue matter to school results (e.g., Togneri & Anderson, 2002). While they differ methodologically and epistemologically, these approaches commonly obscure how district central offices relate to school-level results: they do not distinguish among the myriad staff

members within most central offices whose actions may matter differentially to such results, nor do they address why some districts that engage in activities, such as policy alignment, sometimes do not produce positive results for schools (Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001).

By treating central offices as remote, monolithic contexts (Spillane, 1998), educational researchers seem to assume that central offices consist largely of formal structures like their official visions or broad classes of activities such as leadership. But, recent research has begun to illuminate how the work individual central office staff do—their actual work practices—matters substantially and sometimes more consequentially than factors such as a district's official vision (Honig et al., 2010; Spillane, 1996). For example, in a study of the participation of central offices in the implementation of new, small, autonomous school initiatives, I demonstrated how the district policies authorizing the initiatives proved inadequate for enabling implementation of even basic elements of that reform strategy, such as shrinking school size. Rather, central office staff played essential roles in implementation by engaging in particular bridging and buffering practices that helped schools advance their improvement plans (Honig, 2009).

This research also suggests that school district central office administrators face formidable challenges in engaging in such practices and that they are not likely to be successful in doing so without new models of practice and supports for adopting them. And, research on central offices moving forward will probably continue to rediscover the same disappointing central office performance, unless researchers focus on cases where staff are engaging with those new models and supports. For example, in several studies, I demonstrated how central office administrators struggled to realize various nontraditional policy demands, in part because they did not have access to models or designs of central office work practices consistent with such demands (Honig, 2004, 2009, 2012) or other supports for shifting their own practice. When faced with that situation, central office staff typically sought out models, but frequently found those largely inconsistent with the new work demands. Conversely, central office administrators who did find models consistent with the demands tended to be those we associated with positive results (Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, in press).

The current paucity of research on central offices suggests that any available research-based models of central office practice likely would not be well-elaborated empirically. Furthermore, the complexity of central office contexts means that central office staff will have to adapt available models to their own local realities, both at the outset and as their work unfolds and they receive feedback on their efforts. Accordingly, central office staff will need not only new designs for their practice, but

design processes that help them continuously adapt designs to their settings. In our current research, we are demonstrating how the adoption of challenging new roles for central office staff unavoidably involves this kind of adaptation or negotiation between research-based ideas and central office staff members' prior knowledge and context with the ongoing assistance of an outside partner who facilitates the process. Such work also likely requires central office staff continuously "diagnosing" problems and gauging their progress with various hypothesized strategies for addressing those problems (Spillane & Coldren, 2011).

THE CASE FOR DESIGN-BASED LEADERSHIP RESEARCH

A variation on traditional design studies in education, what I call design-based leadership research, promises to address these shortcomings. In this subsection, I first define this form of research. Then, I explore the promise this approach holds for addressing the problems with the research and practice of central offices that I highlighted above.

As diSessa and Cobb (2004) explain, "[d]esign studies, or design experiments, are iterative, situated, and theory-based attempts simultaneously to understand and improve educational practices" (p. 80). Such work involves a "theory-based practice or intervention that is implemented in the context where the actual intervention would be used . . . in order to study learning phenomena in the real world" (Collins, Joseph, & Bielaczyc, 2004). Design studies emerged in education through the learning sciences to help improve the relevance of school-based interventions for children by moving research out of the laboratory and into authentic situations (Brown, 1992; Collins et al., 2004; Kelly, 2003). Researchers had found that interventions developed outside practice settings lumbered in implementation, in part because they were designed without adequate consideration of the "complexity that is a hallmark of educational settings" (Cobb, Jackson, Smith, Sorum, & Henrick, 2013, p. 9; see also Barab & Squire, 2004). Researchers also realized that even ideas generated in real-world settings were not easily transported to new settings because research on practice is not directly generalizable: what works in one setting does not necessarily work in another (Collins et al., 2004, p. 19; see also Honig, 2006).

To address those challenges, design studies call on researchers to work with practitioners to use cutting-edge knowledge about how the practices of adults, such as educators and administrators, relate to outcomes for children in order to design approaches to adult practice that reflect the research and fit the constraints of their setting. As part of the process, researchers continuously and systematically study the process of design and implementation and feed what they learn back into the design and

the design process to improve both. Theory factors into all aspects of design-based research (diSessa & Cobb, 2004). That is, throughout the process, participants work from an evidence-based logic that supports particular approaches as likely to realize certain results. In more recent work, learning scientists have emphasized the importance of attending to implementation challenges at the point of design—anticipating likely implementation impediments in particular settings and ensuring that, as they move research-based ideas into designs for practitioners, they design for such challenges (Penuel, Fishman, Cheng, & Sabelli, 2011).

Design studies emerged and are still predominately used to address school-level practice and interventions, but they are not solely relevant to those contexts and may be applied to other practice-based settings, such as school district central offices. Such applications, which I call "designed-based leadership research," would also start from the latest knowledge, but in this case, the knowledge would relate to how the practice of leaders matters to results for students and schools. Researchers would work alongside those leaders to use that knowledge to design and engage in new forms of *district central office leadership practice* consistent with the knowledge and appropriate to their settings, rather than working with leaders to design new practices for schools. Researchers participating in the process would work from a solid and rigorous research-based logic about how to help leaders engage in such work. Researchers would conduct theory-building work on the process and feed that knowledge into the practice setting to improve leadership design and implementation in real time and into the field to advance the research and practice of central offices more broadly.

Design-based leadership research builds on, but also departs from, traditional design studies in education in an important respect that helps clarify its focus. Namely, traditional design-based research has focused almost exclusively on school- or child-level interventions. When design-based researchers have considered district- or other system-level leaders, researchers typically have generated "policy memos" or summary recommendations regarding decisions leaders might make about school-level change. In other words, researchers typically cast leaders as the targets of recommendations that come out of school-level design work (e.g., Cobb, Confrey, diSessa, Lehrer, & Schauble, 2003) but do not design for them or otherwise take their leadership practice as a central concern (cf. Cobb et al., 2013). Because the practice of such leaders is essential to improving school-level results, this gap represents a major omission in research that aims to strengthen outcomes for students. Design-based leadership research addresses that gap by focusing on designing for leaders as their main target.

Particularly given its action orientation, design-based leadership research, like other design studies, might also be confused with various forms of so-called "action research" or "participatory action research" (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). For example, some define design work by features of the research process such as focusing on a problem of practice, taking intentional action, and engaging in an iterative collaborative process to understand the impacts of actions to address the problems and how to improve on those actions. But those features are virtually identical to those of action research, which similarly involves practitioners in cycles of identifying problems, designing solutions, taking action, and collecting evidence of their progress.

By contrast, my definition of design-based leadership research builds on conceptions of design studies that emphasize its theory-building components—that design work should involve the development of designs at the boundaries of knowledge about productive practice and aim to build new knowledge about the value of various practices. By this definition, such work is not a true design study unless it occurs in settings in which practitioners and researchers are at the limits of knowledge, not just in the present setting, but *in the field*. Action research traditionally has not included such standards related to knowledge-building and tends to proceed from the limits of the participating practitioners' knowledge, not knowledge in the field.

So defined, design-based leadership research (DBLR) promises to address the specific problems with research on school district central offices highlighted above. First, DBLR focuses primarily, not secondarily, on central office staff and aims to create models to help them meet demands to improve teaching and learning district-wide. This focus on designing for leaders as the central actors, rather than deriving implications for leaders from work in schools and elsewhere, promises to significantly improve the relevance of empirically based guides available for central office work.

Second, DBLR focuses on the iterative use and building of knowledge in, for, and about central office staff *practice*. Such work may address formal structures, such as which offices or reporting lines a central office supports. But, DBLR centrally aims to elaborate the day-to-day work practices of central office staff as fundamental to improving performance.

DBLR is also essentially oriented toward the ongoing adaptation of work practices important in complex central office work environments. This approach prompts researchers and practitioners to understand systematically the dynamics of model implementation and local context and use that information to continuously refine the design (see also, Penuel et al., 2011). Such adjustments should occur in real time, essential to the

urgency of some central office work, rather than at the end of the project when central office staff may have turned over or the usefulness of the information may have significantly lessened.

Additionally, DBLR assumes district leaders will not go it alone, but rather work side by side with design researchers especially able to advance central office work practices. Such partners would help central office staff access the latest knowledge about central office work practices and the dynamics of change in central offices, help central office staff use that knowledge to design and implement changes in their practices, and continuously learn from the process.

CONDUCTING DESIGN-BASED LEADERSHIP RESEARCH

But, what does engaging in design-based leadership research (DBLR) in central offices actually involve? The following are several issues for researchers to grapple with as they engage in this type of work with central office staff. Some of these issues relate to design studies of various stripes, while others are particular to design work in central offices.

First, as in any research or practice context, participants must determine whether this mode of inquiry/intervention is appropriate to their investigation. An essential standard for appropriateness of DBLR is whether its use is likely to advance knowledge in the practice setting *and in the field*. If the work does not fit the latter standard, then various forms of action research or other approaches might be more appropriate. Key questions for researchers to consider in this regard include: Are we at the edge of what we know in the field about the practices that concern us? Will designing for those practices and supporting practitioners in using those designs create a practice setting likely to improve results for students and schools while advancing knowledge in the field?

For example, when our research team embarked on a recent study of central office change, we were concerned that our study would not yield substantially new knowledge for the field unless we or others supported central office staff in our sites in learning about particular research-based central office practices and considering how to adopt them into their own practice. Our previous research had generated a body of knowledge about certain central office work practices that we associated with strengthening schools' capacity for improved instruction (Honig et al., 2010). That research filled important gaps in knowledge about how particular central office staff members can work to improve school capacity in that regard. Our initial investigations into our new research sites suggested that their reform efforts were hitting roadblocks we could easily predict when we compared their current work with that we uncovered in our previous study. For instance, one of our districts had central office

staff members dedicated to supporting principals in becoming stronger instructional leaders in ways that, on the surface, seemed to reflect our research findings that central offices assign executive-level staff to such intensive support for principal learning. However, once we delved deeper in this district, we found these staff members were not actually dedicated to that work, but also managed various curricular programs for the district that invariably curtailed the time they spent working intensively with principals on their growth. When they did engage with principals, these staff members did so with practices reflective of a supervisory stance rather than the teaching-and-learning stance we found essential to actually growing principals as instructional leaders. A study in that district "as-is" likely would have generated knowledge we already had gleaned from our previous study about the kinds of work practices that enable or impede principal learning. Arguably, district leaders would have lost time waiting for study findings from their own district when they could have been moving forward with ideas from extant research.

To help us push knowledge in the field while advancing practice in this study district, we first worked intentionally with leaders in that district to understand what research already teaches about the central office work practices that might yield the results they were after, to design approaches to their own practice that reflected that knowledge base, and to help them implement those designs. As a result of our design partnership with this system, the district was able to move more quickly on certain reform ideas than they might have been able to otherwise. In the process, our research extended knowledge in the field, particularly around conditions that help or hinder the implementation of certain central office work practices to support principal instructional leadership.

Second, some central office staff members struggle with holding their own practice center stage; those interested in conducting DBLR should plan to actively help their central office partners understand the importance of designing for their own practice as a main target of their instructional improvement efforts. For instance, I was working with a team of central office staff members whose responsibilities included serving as the main point of contact between principals and the central office to help improve school performance. I asked them how, if at all, their work related to student learning. They all highlighted that teacher quality is important to such results and that the district wants to see high-quality teaching in every classroom. I asked, "But what is *your* role, if any, in supporting those results." They then indicated that, unless principals are supporting teachers in improving their teaching, the district would not realize such results. I pressed again, "But where are you in that equation?" They responded that they help principals do that work. I asked them what they do specifically to help. They responded generally that

they "work with" and "support" principals in realizing such results, but were hard-pressed to articulate how they do that—what specific practices they engage in with principals to help principals with their performance. This experience, replicated in several districts across the country, suggests that central office staff may be unaccustomed to considering their own practice as particularly central to school-level results, even those charged with supporting schools in realizing improved results, and that they may lack even a basic language for talking about their own practice.

We also encounter central office leaders, particularly superintendents, who do understand the need to address how their central office functions to support school improvement, but they focus their efforts on formal structures rather than work practices; such leaders may benefit from assistance, specifically with understanding the importance of focusing on central office work practices as a main design target, as well as what doing so entails. For instance, in a recent conversation with a director of a central office human resources unit, I asked for information about what the director called a "major" reform of the human resources function within the district. In response, the director showed me a new organizational chart and highlighted how position titles and reporting lines would be different from the previous arrangement, including increases in the number of staff working on some key lines of work, such as teacher recruitment. I asked a series of questions about the extent to which that unit might actually function differently from the earlier one, highlighting various examples of central office units changing their formal structures but not their actual work practices. Not surprisingly, they tend to work in the old ways leaders were trying to reform.

We then embarked on a design process with district leaders around reimagining the work of the human resources (HR) unit to align actual work practices with improved performance. Through this process, we uncovered how key aspects of HR are conducted by staff outside the formal HR unit and are frequently left out of reforms to restructure the unit in ways that have frustrated their success. Through the design process, HR staff also admitted that they have dragged their feet with previous reforms, in part because directors come and go, each with their own organizational charts, and that directors rarely attend to the professional development needs of staff essential to helping them actually work differently. The design process gave them opportunities to understand how their work would need to shift and to identify specific areas in which they would need to grow to improve their performance, regardless of where they sat in the organizational chart.

One specific strategy we have used to help central office staff focus on designing for their practice is by working with them to articulate a

theory of action (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009; Copland, 2003; see also Cobb et al., 2013). A theory of action is a kind of strategic plan that prompts practitioners to articulate the causal chain or through-line between their practices and results—in education, results for students. In so doing, practitioners come to define and distinguish how their participation in particular change processes may influence the behavior of other adults, which in turn matters to student outcomes. In a recent research study, we demonstrated how district leaders engaged each central office unit as well as all individual staff throughout their central office in articulating that through-line and thereby reimagining their work to better align with results for students (Honig et al., 2010). In so doing, these leaders were able to help various staff, from administrative assistants to cabinet members, understand how changes in how they worked with schools day to day were essential to realizing reform goals.

Third, as with other design studies, DBLR involves practitioners adapting research-based ideas to their own practice settings. As discussed above, such adaptations can be essential to replicating successes with reform ideas. But, those involved with DBLR must meaningfully grapple with when an adaptation is true to the research and when it falls outside those boundaries and represents what some design researchers have called "lethal mutations."

For example, in a recent project, we were helping central office staff design improvements based on the basic finding from our previous research that people in particular central office positions should dedicate 100% of their time to working with school principals to strengthen their capacity for instructional leadership (Honig et al. 2010). The superintendent said that they were adopting that model, but since their district was substantially smaller than the districts from which that research finding was derived, they were going to have their staff engage in such work only 60% of the time. To what extent does that adaptation meet the spirit of dedicating staff 100% of the time to principal support and to what extent does it represent a different approach to such work?

We spent substantial time considering this question and ultimately determined that, given district size, 60% of their time meant those staff members could actually spend more hours with their principals than their counterparts in the districts in our original study—so the 60% decision met or exceeded the spirit of the research with regard to possibly available time. However, we also knew from similar adaptations in other districts, that the other demands on central office staff time would likely result in those staff members spending far less than 60% on the target work with principals. Accordingly, we built into the design periodic checks on staff time to ensure that 60% truly meant 60% and that

spending less than 100% time on the work still communicated the value of such work throughout the system in the ways the fully dedicated positions did in our previous study districts.

ISSUES IN CONDUCTING DESIGN-BASED LEADERSHIP RESEARCH

Conducting DBLR in central offices also poses special challenges when it comes to the knowledge-building aspects of design work that researchers should attend to carefully. Among them, unlike teachers' classroom practice, central office administrators' practice stretches across multiple settings and modalities, which can be challenging to sample and capture. For instance, while shadowing a central office staff member for a half day as part of a recent study, we observed the staff member engaged in various activities such as visiting a school site, talking on the phone with another school principal, sitting at the desk engaged in various paperwork, and moving in and out of various meetings at the school district central office. Our shadowing observations of this central office staff person at other points during our data collection took us to still different settings. Given the varied nature of central office work, researchers will have to take care to conduct observations during times of the day and year likely to yield data relevant to their inquiry.

In the process, researchers also should carefully consider what each observation represents. For example, a researcher might conduct observations in the spring and conclude that certain central office staff members focus most of their time on dealing with school staffing. However, based on our research, a fuller picture of the work of those administrators would reveal that they spend disproportionate amounts of time on human resources issues in the spring.

DBLR in central offices also presents some practical challenges. Among them, particularly in tight-budget times, central office leaders tend to cut resources, especially at the central office level. Under such circumstances, researchers may face particular struggles with district leaders reluctant or unwilling to make the kind of investment in maintaining, let alone developing, their central office staff in the ways that DBLR demands. Again, an approach using a theory of action can help district leaders see the importance of their work at the central office level to results at the school level, and otherwise make a case for investing in the central office in various budget contexts. Researchers should also consider choosing partners who do not require significant convincing, even when resources are tight, especially given how labor-intensive DBLR can be.

Second, design-based work of any kind requires close relationships between researchers and practitioners over time. After all, changes in

practice take considerable time to implement, especially when designing for new practice is part of the process. Such relationships may be particularly difficult to establish in school district central offices characterized by frequent turnover and other forms of instability. We have addressed that challenge through several strategies: (a) we try to secure funding for our work that spans beyond any one leaders' tenure, and (b) we never limit our design work to executive-level staff who, in our experience, are those most likely to turn over. Rather, consistent with central office research on the vital importance of frontline and midlevel central office staff to school results, we always engage such staff in our design work. Those staff members also often turn out to be the most knowledgeable about possibilities for new designs for practice and likely implementation impediments.

Third, design-based leadership researchers face a dilemma when it comes to the visibility of their work, which they will need to manage well in order to sustain their efforts. Namely, on the one hand, the ability of researchers to grow and deepen their work may depend on their relative invisibility so that central office staff see their own leaders as owning and driving the work; on the flip side, such invisibility might make it challenging for design partners to attract resources and other support for their involvement, which is also essential to sustaining the work.

For example, in one district, we worked with the superintendent to completely redefine roles and responsibilities of a team of central office staff members using the latest research findings on how people in those positions could support school improvement. We held multiple sessions with various central office staff members to help them understand the research and how and why the superintendent was using it to ground such significant changes. When we later interviewed the staff about the redefined roles and responsibilities—including where the idea to shift those positions came from—staff invariably reported that one day the superintendent, in the words of one, "just had this great idea" to create those positions and that doing so made sense given the disappointing performance of those positions in the past. In this example, our invisibility indicated to us that district leaders so sufficiently owned the project that they did not perceive the work as coming from the outside. However, in order to secure funding and attract other necessary resources for this project, we had to assert our central role in the process.

I also strongly recommend that design-based researchers of all stripes proceed, not only with research-based designs, but a research-based approach to how to help practitioners engage with the new designs—in other words, a robust theory of how to assist practitioners with integrating the new designs into their own practice. Absent such a theory, researchers

risk implementation barriers that will arise when practitioners receive in-adequate support for implementation.

For instance, one common practice for engaging practitioners with new research-based ideas is to translate research into user-friendly forms. However, research on how practitioners actually take up such ideas shows that simple translations are important, but hardly sufficient supports for the implementation of research-based practices. Additional supports needed may include ongoing opportunities to engage with the new ideas and to integrate them into their practice with ongoing feedback. Efforts to help practitioners use research would likely realize better results with more attention not only to what form the research-based ideas take (i.e., the design), but also to support for their implementation.

In our own work, we have relied on ideas about learning assistance relationships from socio-cultural learning theory and theories of social cognition (e.g., Honig, 2009; Honig et al., 2010). These theories help us frame the problem of changing central office practice as one of assisting practitioners' learning. These approaches also identify specific moves we might make in assistance relationships with practitioners that can help our practitioner partners deepen their engagement in particular work practices. By drawing on this research base, we aim *to design our own assistance* from the best available knowledge, while also positioning ourselves to build new knowledge about the types of assistance that can help central office staff members engage in challenging shifts in their own practice. In this way, while engaging in design partnerships to advance central office practice, we also engage in design work to strengthen our own practice as central office partners.

DBLR also raises questions that district leaders should explore carefully when considering design partnerships, such as, "Is DBLR really a way of working that we can commit to over time?" DBLR partnerships can be extremely labor-intensive, in part because of the inherent challenges involved in deepening the quality of staff work practices in real time and over the long term. The work of practice improvement should not function like a project added on to existing work, but rather become part of the core work of staff. But, invariably, in our experience, district leaders, especially when first entering into such work, find they must build new practices while still managing their old systems—so at least in the short term, DBLR can mean additional work. Unless district leaders truly understand the commitment that DBLR requires, they might expend significant resources entering into partnerships they are only likely to abandon later when they more fully realize the commitment involved.

District leaders also should scrutinize the capacity of their potential design partners before entering into a DBLR relationship. Suitable partners should have intimate knowledge of how to conduct high-quality

research in central offices, but also deeply understand central office practice and how to engage with central office staff in designing for change and executing it. Such researchers would also understand how to truly partner with practitioners, including the value of practitioner knowledge to DBLR success. Since design work unfolds over time, leaders should look for design partners who can make long-standing commitments to their system and to working with them side by side in the intensive ways DBLR requires. The paucity of central office research as described earlier, as well as the newness of DBLR, suggests that few researchers may be familiar enough with central office work contexts and change processes to be strong DBLR partners. District leaders should approach potential partners with healthy skepticism.

Those who support the development of educational researchers through training and research grants might significantly advance the field of DBLR by investing in the next generation of researchers who can work ably between research and practice communities in the ways that DBLR demands. Such investments would include professional support for researchers, especially early in their careers, to learn to value and engage in DBLR at a high level of quality. Funders should also consider grant making that skirts program design/implementation and research and that follows the relatively long-term horizons of DBLR (see also Sabelli & Dede, 2013).

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have argued for the importance of design-based leadership research for advancing the research and practice of educational leadership specifically in school district central offices. I have described how such research differs from traditional scholarship on district central offices and various forms of action research. DBLR presents particular challenges for those interested in pursuing such work, including those related to focusing practitioners on the importance of central office practice, especially in tough budget times; capturing central office practice in DBLR knowledge-building activities; and growing and sustaining the work. However, early experience with DBLR is beginning to shed light on how researchers and practitioners alike might address those challenges and advance DBLR partnerships that promise to significantly strengthen central office practice in support of improved results for all students.

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