

RESEARCH THAT MATTERS 2021-2022

# Good Disruption

ADVANCING  
EDUCATIONAL  
JUSTICE

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## Transforming School District Central Offices into

# Engines of

# EQUITY



## UW'S DISTRICT LEADERSHIP DESIGN LAB'S LONGSTANDING PARTNERSHIP WITH HIGHLINE PUBLIC SCHOOLS SHOWS THE WORK IN PROGRESS.

"Bureaucracies like school systems are designed not to be disrupted," says Meredith Honig, UW College of Education professor and director of the District Leadership Design Lab (DL2). "But we know inequities are systemic and that school district central offices are a key part of the 'system.' So how do you help central office bureaucracies engage in good disruption?"

It starts by understanding that investments in schools and teachers focused on furthering excellence and equity will only take districts so far if their district's central office remains unchanged. DL2's research makes these discrepancies clear and shines new light on what central offices do when they advance educational equity. The DL2 team partners with individual districts and district networks to help them use the research as jumping off points to transform their central offices into engines of educational equity. As district leaders come up with newer and better approaches, DL2 studies those and provides new knowledge for the field. Since 2014, Highline Public Schools (HPS) has been a main partner.

### LEADING DIFFERENTLY

For Susanne Jerde, chief academic officer for HPS who has worked with DL2 since the beginning of the partnership, the roots of the HPS-DL2 relationship stem from common commitments to systemic change for equity. Those commitments start with a focus on ensuring an excellent education for every student, especially students historically underserved in public schools. That education requires high-quality, culturally responsive teaching in every classroom and every school principal operating as an excellent instructional leader. For principals to perform as excellent instructional leaders, they need a central office wired to help them be successful, from strategies and resources to planning and implementation that promote continual improvement toward that goal.

"Part of breaking central offices out of their status quo is showing leaders and staff the mismatch between the systems they have and the systems they need to realize educational equity," says Honig. "We help leaders confront the mismatch relentlessly, until they are so dissatisfied, they decide they can't let it go on another day."

For example, DL2's research showed that central offices advance equity when they help school leaders engage in rigorous school improvement planning — starting with creating an ambitious vision for high-quality teaching and planning to support adult and student learning to realize results. But in HPS, like in most other districts across the country, school improvement planning was a required set of forms that schools filled out, not an actual process of partnering with their central office to learn and grow excellent schools together.

As Jerde explained, "For decades, principals would complete a school improvement planning template that was compliant in nature. While it was intended to go with collaborative conversations, many times it did not." Jerde said she realized that no amount of tweaking with the current process would make it more authentic and she disbanded it.

Jerde and Honig then jointly led an 18-month design process involving central office staff, school principals and teachers to reinvent school improvement planning. "Now we're on a path for teachers to be engaged in learning," says Jerde. "Our principals are owning their learning at a much deeper level. Through the school improvement planning redesign process as well as other work with DL2, partnerships with school supervisors look very different than a decade ago. We still have work to do in curriculum and instruction, but we're so much better than we used to be."

Jerde points to the partnership with DL2 as an important contributor to those improvements as well as bottom-line results such as the increase in student graduation rates from 60% to 80% in the past seven years.

**“Part of breaking central offices out of their status quo is showing leaders and staff the mismatch between the systems they have and the systems they need to realize educational equity. We help leaders confront the mismatch relentlessly, until they are so dissatisfied, they decide they can’t let it go on another day.”**

**Dr. Meredith Honig**, professor in the UW College of Education

While the central office change has been much slower than Jerde would like, she’s learned to respect the process. This includes giving people time to understand and provide input. While at first, it seemed like they were less productive, they were operating effectively, collaborating and supporting one another versus continuing to work at cross purposes.

### CENTERING HUMAN DIGNITY

“I like to think that the trajectory of the work we’ve been on is consistent with how the nation as a whole is growing and changing and improving,” says Steve Grubb, chief talent officer at Highline Public Schools. “It’s not a reaction to 2020, but rather a recommitting to values that center human dignity in all of our work. These core values predate 2020 and are going to postdate 2022, providing a coherence and security that only draws out the best in people.”

Since starting his position in 2014, he’s grateful for DL2’s ongoing partnership to support the change. DL2’s research highlights the importance of transforming HR to eliminate red-tape that bog down schools’ abilities to hire and support teachers and other staff and to recruit and retain teachers of color. Instead, HR should be working with principals to ensure that teachers are in the right schools and on the right teams to support their growth and success.

Grubb agreed that the district needed to redesign their HR department to proactively support student learning rather than mainly process paperwork and monitor compliance. Consistent with DL2’s research, he wanted his HR staff understanding the achievement goals and strategies of the district and each school. Their work would consist of helping schools use staffing to drive improvement with a laser-line focus on ensuring teachers reflected the diversity of the student population.

In partnership with DL2, Grubb started by working with staff to cut red tape and used the savings in time and money to build out a workforce planning division. This division coordinates with principals to forecast vacancies and recruit high-quality, diverse teacher and principal candidates. “I can say that now in five minutes,” he says. “But it took a long time to figure it out and operationalize it. I underestimated how difficult it would be. With schools generally understaffed and under resourced, it reinforces being reactive, and thinking in the short-term.” He said that the partnership with DL2 helped him take a long view essential to truly transformative work.

Grubb can point to statistics that show that they are moving the needle. “Since starting in 2014, our overall teaching workforce diversity has increased by just around 10 percent,” he says. “The other key is creating culturally affirming workplace environments that don’t

perpetuate white dominance in the way the schools do business so that the environment is hospitable and welcoming to all of our teachers.”

Although HPS retains teachers of color at a higher rate than the national average, they are still losing too many of those teachers. “When we have exit interviews, we’re often hearing hard things,” Grubb says. “Our data relative to other systems is good and we have a long way to go.”

To take the next step, Honig will facilitate a design process in partnership with Grubb and his team to more fundamentally rethink how HR staffs schools to ensure the recruitment, selection, development and retention of teachers of color.

## LEANING INTO THE OPPORTUNITY

In the coming year, both the HPS superintendent and chief academic officer will pass the baton to new leadership. While it’s tempting to worry that the central office transformation work will falter, according to Grubb, that’s falling back into the wrong mindset again.

“We don’t need to fear the change but rather to lean into the opportunity for improved student learning,” he says. “Any superintendent or chief academic officer is going to absolutely want these responsive efforts and activities and the results to continue.”

DL2 also supports HPS as a place for other school district leaders to learn and engage. “Adults learn by doing, not when they sit in hotel meeting rooms at conferences,” says Honig who hosts “Learning Lab” visits in HPS. “When superintendents and district leadership teams come to HPS, they work with Susanne, Steve and their teams on a challenge the HPS central office is facing in the moment. In the process, visitors contribute to the work in HPS while learning how to address similar challenges at home.”

Moving forward, DL2 is committed to HPS over the long-haul. “Central office improvement is not some short-term academic project for us,” Honig said. “It’s about showing what’s possible when you disrupt the status quo in school districts and stick with that work over the years it takes to remake a centuries-old system.”

At the same time, DL2 has been expanding its research and its reach with additional intensive district partnerships across the country and a new collaboration with a state. DL2 has also just received a major grant from the Hewlett Foundation to launch a six-district network focused on central office transformation for educational equity.

In this effort, DL2 is partnering with The Leadership Academy, a national nonprofit organization leader focused on building the capacity of education leaders at every level of the system. Since 2003, The Leadership Academy has developed more than 10,000 leaders across 37 states, from large urban systems to small rural districts. “We are experienced and skilled practitioners, best in class at supporting leaders in implementing culturally responsive systems,” says Gutierrez. “DL2 brings research credibility to our work in a way that validates our approach and scales the impact of our work.”

Jerde highlighted that this credibility stems in part from how DL2 works — not coming into a district to do work for the district but helping district leaders lead the right work forward themselves. “Designing a system where people own their own way forward makes everybody happier and willing to do the really hard work it takes,” says Jerde. “It’s not only true for teachers and school leaders. It’s also true for our students. When we support students in owning their learning, we make a difference throughout the system.”

Overall, it comes down to a different way of working that’s good for everyone. “When we talk about permanent sustained transformational change in school systems, the least sexy ingredient and the hardest to nail is leadership stability at the highest level and all levels of the system,” says Susan Enfield, HPS’s superintendent. “Consistent leadership and this partnership with DL2 have allowed us to do deep, mutually beneficial work.”