Designing for Coherence While Managing Incoherence: Comparing Six School Systems’ Efforts to Improve Instruction

Naomi Blaushild¹, James Spillane¹, Christine Neumerski², Jennifer Seelig³

Background

- Beginning in the 1990s, the standards and accountability movement in the U.S. ushered in state and federal policies that hold districts, schools, and teachers accountable for students’ test scores.¹
- These policies and social shifts over the past few decades have led to a press for academic excellence and equity.²
- The U.S. educational sector remains largely incoherent, uncoordinated, and comprised of numerous federal, state, and local government agencies and non-governmental actors.³
- The U.S. is also undergoing demographic and broader social changes (e.g., rising income equality, decreased access to social services, declines in school spending, and rising numbers of students living in poverty and receiving special education services).⁴
- In pluralistic and fragmented environments, local education leaders must “craft coherence” by negotiating the fit between external demands and the school systems’ own goals and strategies.⁵ Crafting coherence involves organizations deciding to:

Bridge: pull the environment in through implementation, advocacy, adding peripheral structures in order to meet demands.
Or
Buffer: suspend ties to the environment, create structures outside of the regulatory system, strategically engage with or ignore external demands.

Research Question

How do different school systems manage the press for academic excellence and equity?

Data and Methods

Data comes from a comparative case study of six school systems operating in the U.S.: Charter, Catholic, Urban, Suburban, Montessori (AMI), and International Baccalaureate (IB)

Data collection took place between 2016-2018 and involved interviews (n = 241), observations (n = 76), and document collection at both the system and school levels.

The present study analyzes interviews with 71 system leaders (e.g., superintendents, directors of special education and curriculum & instruction, etc.) and 12 principals from local elementary schools (2/system).

Our analytical approach involved deductively coding interview data according to an extensive codebook, generating reports among specific environmental relationships (e.g., between systems and external stakeholders), and inductive coding.

Findings

1. School systems used materials and ideas from the standards and accountability movement in (re)designing or adapting their educational infrastructures to support coherent visions for instruction.

Educational Infrastructure:
- the coordinated resources, roles, organizational structures, and norms designed by school systems to support teachers’ and leaders’ practice and drive instructional improvement.⁶

2. Responding to disparities in student outcomes and demographic shifts, system and school leaders grappled with challenges that included and transcended classroom instruction. Leaders worked to provide specific instructional supports inside the classroom and attend to students’ social-emotional needs, physical well-being, and families’ needs.

3. To do so, leaders relied on and had to coordinate resources from an array of disparate government and non-governmental agencies scattered across a fragmented and uncoordinated educational sector.

Discussion

- Standards-based reform incentivized and supported school systems’ efforts to build more coherent educational infrastructures. However, these policies did not involve a radical overhaul of the basic arrangements for governing and supporting schooling in America.
- In working toward instructional coherence in elementary ELA in order to provide excellent and equitable instruction, leaders relied heavily on an array agencies that are sprawled across the educational sector — in other words, an incoherent environment.
- Although prior research describes school systems as deciding whether to buffer or to bridge external demands, our analysis suggests that school systems often bridge out of necessity (to procure resources that constrain their agency and ability to buffer.

References


Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Spencer Schools Study at Northwestern University and the University of Michigan, funded by a research grant from the Spencer Foundation (SP0034639-201600066) and a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, Multidisciplinary Program in Education Sciences (R305B140042). We gratefully acknowledge members of our research team: David Cohen, Donald Peurach, Daniella Hall Sutherland, Rongzhou Zhou, Jonathan Sun, and Katherine Senseman.

Figure 1. This network map shows the types of organizations mentioned by system leaders. Leaders frequently described interacting with external agencies in order to procure essential resources, training, and supports for students and families.

Examples of Systems’ Interactions with External Agencies:
- Partnering with universities to provide culturally responsive and trauma responsive training to school and district-level staff
- Partnering with community organizations and businesses to support Community Schools
- Coordinating funds from Title programs to support students in both private and public systems

90% of interactions with external agencies mentioned by participants could be described as bridging.