Chapter 8
Recognizing What Makes Effective School Districts

Abstract
School districts matter, but only effective districts have a positive impact on student learning. After having spent five years researching and working in one school district, the authors outline five understandings related to the complexity of school district leadership and the role of the district superintendent in transforming a district into a professional learning community that positively impacted teaching and learning.

When we started our journey of discovery related to school leadership two decades ago, we were focused on school principals and their role as instructional leaders. After having determined that the effectiveness of instructional leadership was dependent on how it was perceived by teachers and their willingness to engage as leaders, we began to focus on understanding how principals could facilitate the development of a strong teacher leadership team. We believed that if principals and teachers were exposed to the evidence related to shared leadership and school development and if they articulated a commitment to both, change would follow. Much to our disappointment, we learned that our assumptions were not at all accurate. While teacher leadership teams existed in all our study schools, in most they were relegated to being advisory to their school administrators and there was no distribution of leadership roles to other teachers outside the team. Not surprising, then, the majority of teachers in our study schools perceived generally that their engagement in school development was a waste of time. In contrast, in a few higher performing schools, we observed that the teacher leadership team and other teachers felt empowered to make decisions within a defined sphere of influence and viewed decision-making within the school as a shared responsibility.

Similar to many other researchers, we eventually concluded that a huge challenge to the development of teacher leadership was the pervasiveness of the traditional bureaucratic hierarchy and the inability or unwillingness of principals to share power. We pondered, “If we were able to assist schools to develop stronger teacher leadership teams, could these teams be an effective counterbalance to barriers presented by the hierarchy and the negative forces of either the laissez-faire or autocratic school principal?” Once again, it was not long before we realized the fallacy of that assumption. In reality, we found that there exists a great deal of skepticism among
formal leaders and followers alike related to any form of collaborative leadership. Most perceive it to be an “ideal” model with little practical application in the “real” world, and even those who subscribe to a collaborative leadership approach find it quite difficult to implement within the deeply entrenched societal mindscapes that are accepting of the norms and practices of the bureaucratic hierarchy.

This led us to conclude that shifting to a collaborative approach to leadership will not occur simply by providing more theoretical information or merely the opportunity, nor will it occur as a consequence of decree. Because collaborative leadership occurs as an interaction of constituents and formal leaders within an always changing context, and because it is outside of existing cultural norms, it will not likely be more than empty rhetoric if not implemented as a complex innovation. This requires commitment and action of a formal leader who functions within, but pushes the boundaries of, constituents’ level of tolerance for change. Even then, it will take years to make the transition from reliance on the hierarchical structures and norms of the traditional bureaucracy to a professional learning community where collaborative leadership is the accepted norm.

While our early research work was centered entirely in schools, most of it had occurred in partnership with school districts. As we began to better understand the challenges posed to schools by the school district and the existing mindscapes of the bureaucratic hierarchy, we realized that any fundamental sustainable change toward teacher leadership at the school level was unlikely. Predominantly, school and district structures, policies, regulations, and procedures were designed to maintain order and control, and little attention was given to school development or teacher leadership. District personnel perceived school development as another project that had little bearing on the work of the district or schools. Concomitantly in schools, teachers perceived it as just one of the various perfunctory processes required by the school district.

While there are examples of individual schools led by transformational leaders that have successfully engaged in collaborative leadership and professional learning, these are the exception; even in those schools, sustainability of collaborative leadership and professional learning has been found to be rare when key leaders departed the school. In reality, most schools lack the capacity to lead such a complex transformation. We conclude that without the pressure and support of a school district, most schools will continue to function as isolated bureaucratic hierarchies that are controlled by the school principal—school councils, notwithstanding. In fact, with the frequency of principal succession, school council membership turnover, and the constantly shifting priorities of governments and well-meaning but ineffective school districts, it is more likely that as one school begins to learn, another will unlearn.

Our argument, however, is not that all districts have a positive impact on student learning. As a matter of fact, there is convincing evidence that most school districts, like schools, continue to function as traditional hierarchical bureaucracies that inhibit, rather than facilitate, meaningful school reform. We understand, therefore, the reason some governments have chosen to sidestep school districts altogether and have attempted to reform schools directly through mandates and the use of top-down