
An Assessment of the New York City Department of Education School Support Structure

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THE PARTHENON GROUP

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Introduction

A basic question of strategy and organization for any school system is how to manage and support the schools themselves. The structure for supporting schools in the New York City Department of Education (DOE) has undergone dramatic change in the 11+ years since Mayor Bloomberg gained mayoral control. In the eyes of the DOE, this evolution has aimed to achieve two objectives: to provide every school regardless of its neighborhood with access to high-quality support, and to allow the most important decisions regarding staffing, budget, and curriculum to be made at the school level. Along the way, a series of restructuring plans and organizational designs led to a sense of urgency – and, in the eyes of some stakeholders, instability. Beginning from Community School Districts in 2002, the DOE moved to Regions and ROCs (Regional Operations Centers), then to School Support Organizations (SSOs) and Integrated Service Centers, and is now in its fourth year of organizing school support around approximately sixty Children First Networks (CFNs), which provide services related to both instruction and operations for groups of ~25-35 schools each.

As the current administration draws to a close, now is an ideal moment to take stock of the changes that have taken place to the school support structure, to assess where those reforms leave the system today, and to identify how to continue to improve.

Over the past several months, we have focused on just such an assessment at the request of the DOE, combining qualitative and quantitative research as well as best practices nationally. The most important aspect of our research has involved in-depth interviews with more than 100 stakeholders, representing a diverse set of points of view on today's school support model, including some of the most vocal critics of the current administration's reforms. These stakeholders include:

- Senior leadership of the DOE in both instructional and operational areas
- Cluster leaders and the Office of Superintendents
- Principals drawn from a representative sample of tenure and school performance
- Leading non-profits, community-based organizations, and organizations representing parents
- Citywide and community education councils
- Network leaders and network team members

In addition to our interview discussions, we have had full access to a broad set of data that provides insight on the structure and performance of networks today, including measures of principal satisfaction, surveys of teachers and students, network composition (school and staffing), school performance, and spending. Finally, Parthenon has worked with more than 20 urban districts nationally over the past 6 years on issues related to strategy and organization, and our understanding of lessons from the field informs our findings.

In the end, all of our investigation has focused on answering two basic questions:

1. What are the core values of the current school support structure?

More than a specific organizational design, it is useful to view the current network model as reflecting a set of beliefs about how school support should work, specifically in a system on the scale of New York City's. By core values, we have tried to distill the set of beliefs that, when the networks are working well, appear to be most responsible for their effectiveness.

2. What are the key issues that should be considered in an effort to improve the effectiveness of school support in New York City?

Our project did not aim to propose a specific restructuring of school support, but rather to surface a set of issues that appear to be most critical to refine and improve the way that school support works today. Some of these issues may be more tactical and immediate in nature; others reflect long-standing questions that are constant struggles for balance in any large organization.

Executive Summary

Any study of school support in New York City must start by grappling with its most unique challenge: the sheer scale of the city’s public school system. With roughly 1,800 schools and more than 95,000 school-based employees, the complexity of effectively supporting schools in New York City is different from any other district nationally. Twenty-eight of the 50 states in the country have fewer schools to oversee than does the NYC DOE itself. School support in most urban districts across the nation is often not innovative (nor, arguably, very effective): a superintendent employs a team of assistant superintendents who manage principals and drives a centralized strategy for school improvement. Even those who believe this model can work in other places would acknowledge the degree of difficulty in making it work for New York City. Not only does the number and diversity of schools exceed the realistic ability of any central office to diagnose and improve, but the number of layers that would be required to manage schools in this fashion would tend to stifle the innovation and creativity of teachers and principals that are some of the great assets of a city with such a rich base of talent.

The challenge moving forward is to tailor the model of school support to ensure it works in a system of this scale, includes adequate controls to protect the best interests of schools and students, and supports the energies of school leaders and teachers who know their students best. It is misleading to describe decisions regarding the school support structure as being between “today’s system” and “the way it used to be,” yet many outside debates seem to imply this choice as a premise. Indeed, one of the animating forces of our work has been a desire to push beyond the blunt dichotomy of “district vs. network,” and to frame the many detailed benefits and tradeoffs that surround the current model of school support.

Our findings articulate four core values of the current school support structure that our research has suggested are most important to understand and preserve:

1. Schools should be able to choose support that works for them based on their unique needs
2. The support system should protect the autonomy of schools to make decisions regarding hiring, budgets, and curriculum
3. Certain key operational support functions – like budget and HR – are necessarily linked with instructional support to enable school improvement
4. The support structure should be as lean as possible to ensure that resources flow to the school and classroom level

At the same time, we identify four broad issue areas for improvement in the current system – talent, differentiation, community, and time. In the body of the paper, we offer some specific observations and options for consideration within each of these areas:

- a. **Talent:** The current support model features some strong and innovative networks, but also some networks whose leaders and teams cannot effectively manage the complexity of the job
- b. **Differentiation:** The DOE can provide more intensive and directive support to the most struggling schools, while maintaining autonomy for those schools that are ready to use it well
- c. **Community:** The current model makes it challenging for those supporting schools to respond to and connect with local communities, especially in the case of struggling schools and students
- d. **Time:** Perhaps the most powerful support the DOE could provide for schools would be to relieve the numerous demands on a principal’s time

In a moment of leadership transition and debate about the future of the city’s public schools, it is understandable that public discourse has sometimes not reflected the incredible complexity of actually managing this system. The question of how best to support a school system as broad and diverse as New York City’s defies easy answers or simple solutions, and we hope that this assessment is useful in continuing to improve the effectiveness of schools across the city.

Core Values of the School Support Structure

At its essence, the network structure reflects a series of beliefs or values about how best to support school improvement. Regardless of the specific organizational design that a new administration might select, our research indicates that there are four core values of the current model that are most important to understand and preserve in any future structure:

Core Value 1: The fundamental value of the network structure is that schools should be able to choose support that works for them based on their unique needs

We began nearly all of our stakeholder meetings with the question of what each group saw as the core values of the current network structure. In nearly every meeting, the first and foremost answer we received was that the core value of the school support structure has been the autonomy of the school to define and seek out support for their own needs. We understand and have heard the criticism that a weak or struggling school leader may not make the right choices regarding the support that their school needs, and may even be resistant to outside intervention. At the same time, our findings indicate the potential to meet the needs of struggling schools without necessarily compromising the value that the majority of schools receive from more customized and innovative network support groups (this subject is addressed in greater depth later in the paper).

Our conclusion that allowing schools to choose support based on their needs has been an improvement over earlier organizational designs is based on more than opinion. In this case, there are six years of real data to review (although the current network [CFN] model was not adopted citywide until 2010-11, schools were able to choose a support network beginning with the shift to SSOs in 2007-08). *Indeed, the composition of the networks today represents the accumulation of choices of the city's school leaders.* What can be drawn from that experience in terms of what schools value in a support structure? Our research and analysis has highlighted several key findings:

- *Schools prefer to collaborate with a much broader range of their peers than the old district or regional structures allowed.* Not a single network is comprised of schools from only one district, although schools would have been free to make such a choice. Only seven of the current 56 networks have even a majority of their schools from one district. Only four networks have all of their schools in a single borough. In district or regional structures, schools were essentially landlocked by their neighborhood, with limited freedom to work with schools in other parts of the city and no flexibility to determine from whom they would receive support. Now having allowed schools to choose networks for themselves, the results clearly demonstrate just how different their preferences are from those previous structures.
- *A sense of shared values and a network's reputation for effectiveness are the most important drivers for schools in selecting their network.* When asked to choose between a range of factors that might explain their choice of network, 68% of principals said it was a “shared educational philosophy with the network leader and other schools,” more than any of the six factors listed. The current support structure also allows schools to continuously assess the quality of support offered by networks and vote with their feet: A network having a reputation for strong instructional support was cited as a factor in selection by 64% of principals. By contrast, 22% of schools indicated that their selection was based on “the network has many schools from my school's neighborhood or community.” Once again, the current support structure is providing schools with the flexibility to make decisions based on what they value most.
- *The diversity and innovation of networks that has emerged is far greater than any single, central design could have yielded.* Some networks are organized around a distinct educational philosophy or school model; others around a common set of student needs; and others around strong personal relationships. Within a subset of networks, local community and identity remains an important factor, and the network model has allowed those schools that value collaboration

within local communities to choose to work together. More than anything, the past six years of experience have indicated the wide range of factors that influence schools' preferences – more diversity than any top-down system could predict.

- *Schools that are struggling can benefit from a diverse set of peers.* A common suggestion is that the DOE consider removing the autonomy of struggling schools to choose their network team and working with these schools in a dedicated fashion. In our discussions with principals, we heard a strong counterweight to this argument: there is substantial learning that results from these principals working alongside schools from different parts of the city, many of whom are higher-performing. Best practice in teaching and learning does not call for keeping those students who are struggling in self-contained settings, but rather fostering inclusive environments and then applying extra support. We believe the same principle can be applied to school support.
- *Choice has led to greater satisfaction from principals.* Every year, schools are invited to switch from their current network if they prefer. On average, more than 90% of schools have chosen to remain with their networks in any given year, and the percentage has remained stable across years. Similarly, when the DOE asks schools to rate their satisfaction with the service they receive from various central offices, the network teams are consistently rated far higher than other central supports, as well as the borough-based Integrated Service Centers that preceded them for operational support.
- *Choice introduces continuous improvement, with strong networks gaining membership and weaker networks losing schools.* Over time, schools have tended to join networks whose schools have strong progress report scores, have high principal satisfaction with network team performance, and whose performance is rated highly on the DOE's qualitative assessment of network performance – and to leave networks that lack these results.

We draw several conclusions from the data above that reinforces the notion of autonomy as a core value: that the network structure reflects what schools feel they want and need better than prior district or regional models; that schools like the autonomy that has been granted to them; and that the mechanisms of choice that are built into the system enable it to improve over time.

This continuous improvement model is reinforced by the DOE's performance management of networks. In an administration that has relied on data-driven accountability for schools, networks are managed on a similar model – each one receiving a 1-4 rating annually that reflects a mixture of their schools' performance, principal satisfaction with their services, and a qualitative assessment of their ability to drive school improvement (especially through “hard conversations” with their principals). Over the past three years, the DOE has closed eight networks due to poor performance and launched six new ones in their place.

Overall, our research and stakeholder discussions would indicate that schools' autonomy to identify and select the support they need is the core value of the network model. Any significant changes to the current model would have to weigh the risk of overturning the expressed choices of school leaders – especially in instances where the network structure has allowed for innovative groupings that could not be replicated in a more geographic organization (e.g., all international schools collaborating in a network, all portfolio assessment schools collaborating in a network).

With that in mind, several additional values have emerged in our conversations with stakeholders.

Core Value 2: The support system should protect the autonomy of schools to make decisions regarding hiring, budgets, and curriculum

In the model of the community school districts, the default mode of the central office was often to impose upon, or override, the school even on issues of day-to-day management. Superintendents themselves often felt pressure from local elected officials around issues of employment and contracts. In many

districts, a culture of patronage was part of the fabric of the system itself, and documented instances of corruption were not uncommon. The negative impact on schools was pervasive, rooted in the accumulation of small decisions that forced educators to compromise on their better instincts: principals being told which teachers they would hire rather than choosing for themselves based on qualifications; schools having to hire an extra assistant principal or clerical staff member when they would have preferred another teacher or guidance counselor; or teachers having to abandon a reading or math program that was working for their students because the district was rolling out a new curriculum.

The passage of time has led many schools to take for granted the autonomy that they enjoy today over hiring, budget, and curriculum. Many of today's school leaders have only experienced the current support system – they see its flaws, but not what came before.

It is, of course, possible to maintain school-level autonomy over all of these areas without keeping every aspect of the current network structure. Indeed, we recommend later in this paper several ways that today's structure could be improved. But it is equally important to acknowledge that it is a slippery slope once a superintendent is given authority over the school support structure, and central functions like budget and HR that come along with it. If a school leader gets a call from his or her rating officer suggesting that a particular teacher be hired, how many will feel confident enough to make their own decision?

Furthermore, there are real benefits in separating school support from supervision and evaluation. While the very notion of school support implies assessing a school's particular strengths and challenges and responding flexibly, district and regional superintendents all too often took a more uniform approach to their schools, creating broad mandates and supervising compliance from afar. In our research, veteran principals, who have been in place throughout the evolution of school support over the last 10-15 years or more, typically expressed how helpful it is to have someone in the system whose job is purely defined around the goal of making their schools better. A comment from one principal, in a focus group who was comparing their work with network leaders today to their experience with Superintendents pre-2002, is representative of many similar remarks that we heard. "There are so many things that I go to my network leader with that I would never have asked my [former] superintendent, because I can tell that she's on my side."

Core Value 3: Certain key operational support functions – like budget and HR – are necessarily linked with instructional support to enable school improvement

The most recent step in the transformation of school support at the NYC DOE was the adoption of Children First Networks. Network teams that had previously been focused (prior to 2010-11) only on providing instructional support were now expanded to deliver operational support to schools, while the borough-based Integrated Service Centers that had provided operational support were dissolved. At the root of the decision to make this shift was an observation of the behaviors of highly effective, autonomous schools: that the best school leaders see operations as fully integrated with their instructional vision, and that therefore the support model had to allow operations and instruction to work together for schools in just as holistic a fashion.

The result of this shift is that network teams wear many hats in providing support to schools across a wide range of functional areas: from instruction, to special education, to transportation and facilities. While one can debate whether all of these functions are best situated within the network team (something addressed later), both principals and network team leaders recognize that certain operational functions clearly benefit from the alignment and integration that the current structure offers.

Most prominently, nearly all principals we spoke with singled out for praise the fact that budget and HR supports were now a part of their network team – feeling that this integration made it easier for support teams to help them identify resources that supported their instructional goals, and to bring on new staff

with the skills and profile that their school really needs. When problems arise, they have increased the ability to hold budget and HR support staff accountable and getting a quick response has improved. Just as importantly, network staff members in the area of budget and HR expressed how this integration had made them more effective at their jobs. Previously isolated from a bigger picture of what schools' priorities were (whether in Integrated Service Centers, ROCs, or in larger, more siloed district offices), these team members now work closely with principals and instructional coaches and feel that they can better diagnose and serve schools' needs with the wider vantage point that they enjoy.

Core Value 4: The support structure should be as lean as possible to ensure that resources flow to the school and classroom level

It follows that a system predicated on school autonomy should maximize the level of resources at the discretion of school leaders. The evolution of school support over the past 10 years has been a story of doing just that: reducing the size and layers of bureaucracy in order to devolve financial resources to schools. Indeed, from FY2005 to FY2011 (the first year that the current network model was fully adopted) the cost of the school support system – which we define as the various organizations responsible for providing instructional and operational support to schools – declined from \$266M to \$181M, a savings of \$85M or 32%. This six-year period came after the significant efficiencies that had already resulted from restructuring and consolidating district offices into the regional structure in 2003.

If anything, this emphasis on efficiency within school support went almost too far. The effectiveness of support relies upon getting the right ratio of instructional coaches to schools. While state and local funding for networks has remained generally consistent since 2011, an infusion of resources from the federal Race to the Top program has allowed networks to provide coaches for schools at a ratio of roughly one per eight schools. Going forward, especially as Race to the Top funds are scheduled to end, it is important to balance the ongoing priority on devolving resources to schools with finding a way to maintain the level of support resources for schools that need them.

Improving Effectiveness of School Support

Our research and stakeholder conversations have offered exposure to a wide range of criticisms and questions about the current school support model in New York City. Even as we have concluded that the four core values described earlier are important to preserve, we also believe that there are four areas that – regardless of the start of a new administration – would be beneficial for the DOE to consider in order to improve the quality and consistency of school support. These fall under the themes of *talent, differentiation, community, and time*.

- a. **Talent:** The current support model features some strong and innovative networks, but also some networks whose leaders and teams cannot effectively manage the complexity of the job
- b. **Differentiation:** The DOE can provide more intensive and directive support to the most struggling schools, while maintaining autonomy for those schools that are ready to use it well
- c. **Community:** The current model makes it challenging for those supporting schools to respond to and connect with local communities, especially in the case of struggling schools and students
- d. **Time:** Perhaps the most powerful support the DOE could provide for schools would be to relieve the numerous demands on a Principal's time

The following sections provide more perspective on these four issues, along with some more specific observations and options that could be considered in order to address key concerns.

Talent

In designing any school support system, there will always be a tradeoff between more intensive support ratios – which implies smaller groups of schools per support unit – and the ease of filling key positions with high-quality talent. The current model, in which the DOE has to staff 56 network teams in addition to cluster teams and superintendents, has significantly increased the challenge of talent development and hiring for all of these positions, and left the existing talent base stretched fairly thin. Importantly, this is not because the current support system has more people than prior structures; to the contrary, it has fewer. However, the jobs themselves have become more challenging: the network model requires team members who are more responsive, more versatile – and able to earn authority and trust based on merit, without the crutch of being able to force a school to do something.

The challenge of maintaining a consistent level of quality support is greatest in highly specialized operational functions and functions related to serving students with special needs (such as students with disabilities and English language learners). Often, the same individuals who in earlier organizational designs were specialists in a narrow area are today responsible for multiple broad functional areas. Whereas inconsistent levels of expertise could be covered up by the large scale of centralized departments in the past, each individual's strengths and weaknesses are exposed in the more decentralized network structure. In the case of students with special needs, this structural issue is compounded by a long history – stretching back well before this administration – of weak central office capacity in special education. In recent years, the DOE has attempted to improve central office capacity with a greater focus on instructional practice vs. compliance, and Race to the Top funds have been used to bolster field support with 70 network-based coaches hired to work with schools on the recent special education reforms. Despite this infusion of additional resources, the challenge of finding and maintaining sufficient support for the dramatic changes underlying special education reform remains an important one to solve.

Identifying high-quality support team members and finding the most effective organizational design to leverage their skills is a multi-faceted challenge, but there are a number of areas to consider both in the short and long term to address this issue:

- *It may be possible to provide easier and broader access to detailed subject matter and content experts.* There are not necessarily fewer experts in the system today than there were ten years ago, but they are spread across more networks and their responsibilities are more diffuse. There may be an opportunity to use the cluster structure (or another more regional model) to identify the strongest experts on certain detailed operational and special needs issues, and make those resources available to network team members and school leaders as escalation resources.
- *Some highly specialized functions may be better off centralized or geographically based.* We addressed earlier that there is a core set of operational functions that is valuable to remain linked with instructional support. The other side of this coin is a set of functions – typically reliant on a specialized expertise – that stretches the bandwidth of network team members without delivering better support for schools. Some functions have retained a geographic presence even as they also have network team coverage (e.g., transportation, food services), leaving network team members to play a middleman role. Other functions that require narrow areas of expertise and/or dedicated attention are also hard to service out of a network team where team members are inevitably bearing multiple responsibilities (e.g., impartial hearings and supervision of related services for students with disabilities, IT and application support for schools). With the lessons of the past four years of the current model in mind, now seems like the right moment to undertake a detailed exercise of reexamining the proper organization specialized functional areas.
- *Salary and hiring rules are an impediment to improvement.* As mentioned above, the role played by effective network team members is a highly challenging one, and often the salary levels of these positions do not reflect the level of responsibility or skill that these jobs require – the system does not appear to value these employees as highly as their impact to schools would

suggest they should. This challenge is exacerbated by years of hiring restrictions that have limited the ability of the system to bring in new talent.

- *Greater priority could be given to building a pipeline of operational leaders.* Much attention has been paid – rightfully so – to the importance of cultivating instructional leaders at all levels of the system. Yet strong operational leadership is also essential to a high-functioning system, and the formal efforts that are in place to systematically identify and develop individuals with strong operational skills are limited in scale, typically not seen as district-wide priorities.
- *With so many networks, it may not be realistic to find enough network leaders who can shape their own vision and agenda for school improvement.* In the ideal of the current system, each of the 56 networks would forge an individual identity and philosophy to attract like-minded schools; the resulting diversity and competition of approaches would itself be a driver of system improvement. In reality, it may be infeasible to maintain 56 leaders with this level of individual vision and team-building skill. The DOE has heightened the challenge of developing truly differentiated networks by capping the number of schools they can serve. To take advantage of the best talent for supporting schools, a more flexible approach could entail a variety of approaches, allowing popular and effective networks to grow the number of schools they serve (and the resources they receive) and/or allowing more thoughtful differentiation and autonomy at the cluster level so that these organizations assume a more distinct philosophy and approach. One example to learn from here could be the ongoing PSO model, in which outside organizations are able to develop and hone a consistent philosophy of school support over time, implement it across multiple individual networks, and grow the number of schools they serve. Such a system relieves the pressure on each individual network leader to “figure it out for themselves.”

Differentiation

In the philosophy of the Children First reforms, school autonomy is a precondition for school success. In practice, both the meaning and the proper level of autonomy are inevitably different from school to school. Even today, network teams do not treat each school the same; rather, they make countless judgments about how much guidance a school requires on any given issue. On a day-to-day basis, the DOE operates on a model of “differentiated empowerment.”

Yet this differentiation remains informal. There is no systematic linkage between the city’s accountability tools and different models or levels of support, even though the combination of qualitative and quantitative information the DOE now collects on its schools surpasses nearly any district nationally. Although schools are free to choose between networks, the common design of the networks themselves does not offer a real choice in the level and type of support a school could receive. Relative to the ideal, the DOE today may provide too little empowerment for a set of schools that are high performing and experience little benefit from central supports, while offering too much latitude to principals who will not be able to figure out how to improve on their own, but who could potentially make progress within a more robust support model.

The most notable strategy of the DOE with struggling schools is that of school phase-out and new school development, which has been applied most prominently by replacing large, zoned high schools with new, small high schools of choice. While this strategy is sensitive and controversial in many communities, rigorous independent research (e.g., the oft-cited MDRC study recently reaffirmed by a similar report from MIT and Duke University) has demonstrated its impact on student outcomes: often doubling the graduation rate at large high school campuses, and generally improving a student’s likelihood to graduate by ~10 percentage points after controlling for all identifiable factors. Nationally, we are aware of no other school improvement strategy having been implemented at scale and producing such large impact under a randomized study design. Nevertheless, even before considering the controversy associated with this approach, it is clear that the strategy cannot represent the DOE’s only mechanism for school improvement. For one, it is less proven at the elementary and middle-school levels. More generally, the

number of struggling schools in the city is too large to be addressed by phase-out and new school development alone.

Although it is not widely discussed (either by the DOE or its critics), the last few years have seen the DOE take steps to test out more assertive direct support models for struggling schools. For example, there is a publicly articulated process by which the lowest-performing ~15% of schools is identified on the basis of both quantitative and qualitative information. Citywide, networks now must work with each school in that 15% to develop a targeted action plan (TAP), which identifies the key areas in which a school needs to improve and commits both the network team and the school leadership team to a specific collaborative action plan in those areas. While early, this effort shows some promise: three-quarters of schools with a TAP that received a D or F on their progress report in 2011-12 saw an increase of at least one letter grade in 2012-13; 38 percent increased their results by two or more letter grades.

For another example, the Middle School Quality Initiative targets schools with very low percentages of students reading at grade level, and aims to support them in implementing a more standard instructional and student support approach to improving outcomes. The initiative has proven to be very popular with middle schools (more schools have sought to join than the program can accommodate). Finally, the Transition Support Network is dedicated to meeting the needs of those schools that are in a period of phasing out, and for the current school year includes a dedicated superintendent for phase-out high schools to unify supervisory authority and support for this unique set of schools. These kind of programs, while still nascent in some cases, speak to the potential for a more comprehensive examination of how best to balance autonomy, direction, and support in driving school improvement.

The reality is that when a school is struggling and its leadership team does not know how to correct things on their own, they do need more direction. Our core observation is that it is possible to be more directive and provide increased capacity to the most struggling schools in the system without taking away the autonomy of all principals. Several potential strategies could enable a differentiated approach to school support.

- *Utilize the authority of superintendents more directly in supporting the lowest-performing schools.* The formal authority of the superintendent is of greatest value when working with struggling schools that, without strong guidance, may not necessarily make the best use of their autonomy. Yet one consequence of the current model, in reflecting on four years of implementation, is that today superintendents have inconsistent roles with struggling schools in their districts and no formal responsibility to intervene. Different options exist for how a stronger connection between supervision and support in these schools could be achieved. The most direct extension of the current structure would be to make the superintendent an active party to a struggling school's TAP – such that the plan specifies not just the role of the network and the school, but also the superintendent, and ensures that the schools are accountable for their improvement activities as a part of the superintendent's oversight and evaluation. Alternatively, in a larger change, superintendents could be given clear authority and responsibility to drive planning and support for the schools in their district that are among the lowest 15% citywide. These schools could continue to belong to a network for purposes of exposure to and collaboration with peers, but the superintendent would supersede the role of the network leader in establishing school improvement priorities. Regardless of the specific structure, the consequence would be a more directive support model for the lowest-performing schools, and a greater level of coordination between network and superintendent.
- *More school support resources should be dedicated to the lowest-performing schools.* Today, a TAP typically commits a network to dedicate more time and energy to the lowest-performing schools. This commitment comes at the expense of time for other schools in the network, in a model in which network team members are already stretched. The flipside of diminished autonomy for struggling schools should be more intensive support capacity for the school, with

staff members rigorously screened for their experience having worked effectively in school turnaround situations. In a model where the network remains the main support vehicle, networks could be staffed with additional team members dedicated to working with schools on their TAP (today, network teams do not receive additional resources regardless of the number of such schools they serve). In a model where the superintendent assumes responsibility for the lowest-performing schools, they would require a team of specialists who could establish the definitive teaching and learning strategy for each school and work closely with leaders and teachers on research-based practices to support school improvement. Superintendents would need to demonstrate, however, a different approach and philosophy to school support than that which characterized many districts before 2002: highly accountable for results, visible and present in the schools, and flexible to the assets and challenges of any given school in crafting a plan for improvement.

- *Link the progress of the lowest-performing schools to a more clear, earned autonomy framework.* The options above outline scenarios in which the lowest-performing schools are subject to more assertive supervision and directive guidance about how to improve; they imply a system in which – for a relatively small share of schools – autonomy is more earned than granted. By extension, when schools that are low performing show sustained progress in student achievement, they should receive greater autonomy in setting their own teaching and learning strategies, and gain greater latitude to use citywide networks for school support based on their own sense of their needs. Clear quantitative and qualitative performance criteria should govern when and how this transition occurs. On the other hand, when low-performing schools continue to stagnate or decline despite more intensive and directive support from networks or superintendents, then aggressive reconstitution or closure options should be considered.
- *Create networks that specialize in and promote a more structured, specific approach to curriculum and instruction.* Many network leaders, in our discussions, comment on the challenge of leading their organizations when they lack a clear answer for “what does it mean to be a school in my particular network?” To some extent, this reflects the talent issues we discussed above, and the inconsistent ability of network leaders to articulate a distinctive vision. But it also reflects in part an intentional decision in the design of networks not to drive a specific, affirmative vision of teaching and learning. Although networks can and should remain free to be chosen by principals, the DOE could seek to create some networks that stand for a specific instructional model or support approach (e.g., a mastery-based learning network). We believe that there is a segment of principals – including, importantly, many schools with average or better performance – who would welcome the opportunity to work within a collaborative peer group that takes a more consistent and detailed approach to curriculum and pedagogy.

Community

In our conversations with principals who were veterans of the system from prior administrations, they echoed a theme that the past 12 years had led people to forget just how things worked in the former district organization – the mandates, inequity, and occasional corruption that characterized the system. The data from all schools citywide bears this out, showing (as mentioned in previous sections) that most principals ascribe relatively low value to affiliating with other schools in their neighborhood. Indeed, many principals have reported to us that they find it refreshing and constructive to be exposed to peers from schools all over the city.

On the other hand, this is not to suggest that geography has no relevance for organizing school support. Parents in the current system sometimes feel that they are left without a clear channel to seek resolution of issues they may have with a school. While the DOE points out that each district office has a family advocate position, there is a legitimate concern from parents that this position is disconnected from the day-to-day support, oversight, and resources that networks provide, and that district offices have few

resources to act on their concerns. Moreover, in certain communities where parents are highly mobilized in support of effective schools, networks – because they typically span multiple boroughs – may be challenged in finding ways to tap into the local knowledge and energy for school improvement that already exists. Community members may then default to raising their concerns with the DOE centrally, which often struggles to distinguish the exact request being made – whether for better information, different decisions, more resources, or something else – and likely is too far removed from each particular situation to be the ideal source of solutions in a system of this scale.

Our conversations through this research, as well as our experience, would more broadly suggest that these concerns have particular resonance in the case of struggling schools. High-performing schools often have established systems for engaging parents and tapping into community resources – indeed, this is part of what makes them high-performing. On the other hand, when schools are being considered for phase-out, local community members sometimes assert that they knew for years that the school was deteriorating, but felt disconnected from any efforts to help the school improve. Others contend that when they try to report to the DOE that a school is struggling, they cannot access real decision-makers, and the support structure is not responsive to their concerns. It is hard to assess how frequently this kind of breakdown actually occurs, but even the risk that it could fuel suspicion on the part of community members.

The challenge for improving school support is thus how to avoid the pitfalls of the past, heed the evident desire of principals to be able to work with peers from across the city, and yet improve the ability of the DOE to work with families and communities in support of schools that need improvement. Our research leaves us with several observations about the type of actions that the DOE could take to thread this needle.

- *The concerns of local communities reinforce the idea (mentioned above) of giving superintendents a greater role in supporting struggling schools specifically.* Above, we discuss a potential model where superintendents have a clear responsibility for supporting struggling schools, as well as team members to enable them to be effective in their work. This directly and specifically addresses the core concern of community members: that they don't know who is responsible for struggling schools, and that their community district office lacks the authority and resources to act on their concerns when raised.
- *Strengthen the use of existing data and resources that monitor and support parent and community engagement.* Last year, a school survey administered to parents received nearly 500,000 responses. This is an incredibly rich and unique source of information to monitor the engagement of families with their children's schools and to spotlight schools that need greater support. Parent coordinator positions that exist in the vast majority of schools offer an on-the-ground resource to both surface challenges and implement improvements. Although all of this data is publicly reported and factored into school accountability, the school support structure could include more dedicated resources and concrete activities to ensure that this data is being acted on and that school-level resources are being put to their best use.

Time

The biggest complaint we have heard from schools, and one which is readily acknowledged by the leadership of the DOE, is that increased autonomy has not materially reduced the amount of time that principals spend addressing issues that flow from the central office. In recent years, some concerted effort has been made to streamline certain requirements. For example, the state-mandated Comprehensive Education Plan (CEP) for each school once required principals to complete a 50-page document each year – but has now been reduced to 5-10 pages. However, the implication of school autonomy itself is that principals have more responsibility today than ever, and the legal and regulatory requirements that come along with running a school or school system have not abated. As the city implements the state's new program for teacher and principal evaluation, this pressure is likely only to

rise. In the face of these competing forces, the DOE's efforts to relieve the burdens on principals have struggled to gain meaningful traction.

Our reflection would be that much of the existing gains that autonomy has delivered were policy-driven: swiftly changing policy to free principals from centrally imposed meetings, PD sessions, hiring constraints, etc. These were critical moves, but they were relatively easy to implement, and there are not many more policy levers, if any, that can remain and have a meaningful impact on a principal's experience (at least policy levers that are feasible given legal and contractual constraints).

Therefore, the next layer of real empowerment for principals is to attack the built-in inefficiency of long-standing district systems and to unpack the layers of federal and state regulations that affect school procedures. It is inevitable that principals will have to spend more time conducting classroom observations; if done right, this is a good use of their time. But the time that is spent executing and gaining approval for HR moves, reconciling budgets through legacy systems, or processing compliance work related to special education – just to name a few examples – is time that could be reduced with intentional focus by the DOE on improving business processes and cooperation from the state on streamlining or clarifying regulations. As one external partner said, “We don't even stop to reflect on how inefficient the systems that drive our everyday work are, because they've been that way for so long.”

Taking on these challenges is painstaking, detail-oriented work that requires the right mix of expertise and strategic thinking. Leaders with these capabilities are hard to come by in any organization, and those that exist within the DOE today tend to be stretched across many competing priorities. Making the core systems and processes of the agency work better for schools is a key to entrenching autonomy as a sustainable model.

Conclusion

Even after 12 years of reform, New York City schools are very much in the early-to-middle stages of the time it takes to change the culture of an organization of this scale. Expectations for students and teachers have dramatically increased, first through changes to state testing and graduation requirements, and more recently through the adoption of Common Core State Standards. The first class of children that entered kindergarten under mayoral control has yet to graduate high school, even as the page is turning to a new administration. For the most part, the school support strategies that characterize today's structure began to be implemented when today's high school seniors were already in middle school. Impatience to improve school support going forward is understandable and correct given the urgent timeframe for the children in schools today, but it is also true that organizational change on a massive scale requires consistent fine-tuning and a measure of stability rather than repeated overhaul.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of school support is much more about enabling a systemic culture change than it is about structure per se. If the expectations for students and teachers is changing, so must the expectations for the school support system undergo their own evolution: shifting the culture to make the system itself more responsive to the needs of schools, more flexible to the diversity that exists across schools, and more modest in respecting the efforts of school leaders and teachers to drive student achievement in their classrooms every day.

Viewing changes in school support through the lens of culture change points out an important reality: the people providing school support do not go away when the structure changes. Many of today's network team members served as local instructional superintendents, grants managers, or some other title in the regional structure; before that, they worked in district offices. If the current network structure is changed, many of the same individuals will remain. The change in culture will not be achieved as a matter of exact organizational structure, but rather by getting a few core values right, and then providing time and support for individual behavior to adapt to new incentives and context. The basic notion that those providing

school support are accountable in part to the schools they serve, rather than to a large central office or a local board, is a powerful impetus to change a culture over time.

Every decision in designing a school support system brings the risk of unintended consequences, and it is easy to imagine that in attempting to address the complaints of today, overreach can lead the problems of prior regimes to resurface. For this reason, it is our hope that the future course of school support at the DOE is one that appreciates the core values that the current model has gotten right, and finds a way to consolidate those gains while making important, but ultimately incremental, changes to address the opportunities that exist.

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