

# ORGANIZING AND MANAGING INSTRUCTION IN US PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS: CONSIDERATIONS FOR FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, AND STATES



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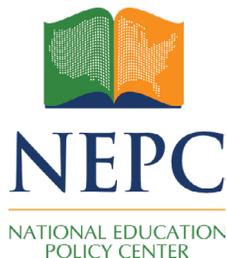
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## Executive Summary

This policy brief examines new ways that US public school districts are organizing and managing instruction, ways that family/community organizations can engage those efforts, and ways that states can support them in doing so.

Since the onset of systemic reform in the early 1990s, districts have been pressed by federal policies, state policies, and philanthropic initiatives to improve outcomes and close gaps in students' educational experiences. That has districts reforming how they organize and manage instruction: the day-to-day work of teachers and students in classrooms, six hours or more per day, 180 days or more per year, for 12 or more years.

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Historically, districts evolved to feature a default approach to instructional organization and management, focused on sorting students into schools, classes, academic tracks, and remedial/compensatory programs; resourcing those instructional venues with teachers, curriculum frameworks, textbooks, and other instructional materials; and delegating to individual teachers primary responsibility for organizing and managing the day-to-day specifics of instruction for the students assigned to them using the resources afforded them. While responsive to (among other things) widely held assumptions about the relationship between resources and learning, this approach, which we call “the American default,” also institutionalized structures providing low-quality and inequitable educational experiences and outcomes for many students.

Beginning in the early 1990s, policy and philanthropic initiatives have aimed to disrupt the American default. Examples include policy rhetoric pushing for deeper learning, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, and ambitious instruction; the use of state-level standards and assessments to hold districts and schools accountable for improving instruction and student outcomes; the introduction of school choice within and between districts to create market-like incentives for improvement; increased emphasis on the use of data and research to manage and evaluate improvement efforts; and increased emphasis on the professional preparation and quality of teachers.

This sustained press has generated a great deal of change. New domains of work are emerging in districts that go well beyond sorting-resourcing-and-delegating to actively organizing and managing instruction with the goal of improving educational quality and reducing disparities. Yet this sustained press also risks complicating local democratic control over public schooling. Federal policies, state policies, and philanthropic initiatives are interacting to influence how districts define and pursue high-quality instruction for all students, with districts increasingly dependent on non-governmental organizations for the technical resources and supports needed to respond quickly and effectively. This brief takes a close look at the new types of educational systems and the way they change expectations and options around family and community voice.

Families and communities face several challenges when they seek to improve educational opportunities for all students. As they attempt to assert influence on public school districts, historically marginalized family and community groups generally have limited financial and political resources and oftentimes find themselves in competition with better-resourced constituencies. In addition, complex and constantly changing reform contexts can make it difficult to organize effectively for collective voice. This is particularly challenging when every school district structures its management of teaching and learning differently. Understanding the different ways that districts are reforming instructional organization and management addresses this last challenge by helping family and community organizations strategically direct their efforts.

These challenges play out differently in different types of systems, and we see four primary types of education systems emerging. Each of these four has a characteristic theory of action and each is associated with strategies for district reform that have gained or maintained currency since the mid-1990s:

- Managerial systems characterized by a standard educational approach developed

by the central office and administered consistently, district-wide.

- Market-driven systems characterized by the differentiation of educational approaches among schools, with families and communities advocating for (and choosing among) schools that are aligned with their educational values and aspirations.
- Federated systems characterized by independence among schools in devising their educational approaches within parameters established by the central office, balanced by an ethos of community and cooperation.
- Networked systems characterized by the central office and schools collaborating to develop, use, and continuously improve a conventional, district-wide educational approach.

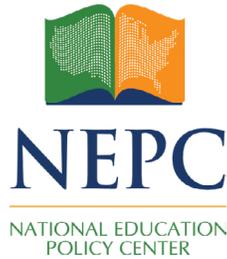
Each of the four system types suggests different, primary points of leverage that families and communities might exercise in central offices and schools. For example:

- Within managerial systems, family/community organizations might be expected to assert influence on efforts in central offices to establish a standard instructional approach developed by the central office and administered consistently, district-wide.
- Within market-driven systems, family/community organizations might be expected to assert influence through choice among schools and on entrepreneurial and innovation activities within schools.
- Within federated systems, family/community organizations might be expected to assert influence on central office decisions about core instructional resources while asserting primary influence on schools in establishing and pursuing locally-responsive instructional approaches.
- Within networked systems, family/community organizations might be expected to assert influence on central offices in establishing comprehensive, district-wide instructional approaches and on schools in adapting those approaches in response to local circumstances.

From that follows four recommendations for states committed to sustaining new patterns of instructional organization and management while also expanding the influence of family/community organizations:

- Sustain the state-level press to improve instruction, its organization, and its management both to make progress in improving outcomes and closing gaps and to prevent a regression to the harmful effects of the American default.
- Support districts in understanding where and how family/community organizations can contribute to efforts to organize and manage instruction in new ways.
- Support families and communities in engaging district reform efforts by providing guidance and resources for organizing themselves, for analyzing efforts in districts to organize and manage instruction in new ways, and for asserting influence.

- Carefully study the evolution of instructional organization and management with the goal of understanding (a) shifts toward the four types of education systems identified in this analysis, (b) the emergence of different types of systems not yet evident in the literature, and (c) the strengths and weaknesses of each in specific district and school contexts.



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## Introduction

The purpose of this policy brief is to examine new ways that public school districts are organizing and managing instruction, ways that family/community organizations can engage those efforts, and ways that states can support them in doing so.

Since the onset of the systemic reform era in the early 1990s, US public school districts have been pressed by federal policies, state policies, and philanthropic initiatives to improve students' educational experiences and outcomes on average and to reduce disparities among them.<sup>1</sup> That, in turn, has public school districts reforming ways in which they organize and manage instruction: the day-to-day work of teachers and students in classrooms, six hours or more per day, 180 days or more per year, for 12 or more years.

A problem, though, is that this combination of federal and state policies, philanthropic initiatives, and district responses has complicated local democratic control over public schooling and, with that, the efforts of families and communities to ensure that their educational values and aspirations are integral to their students' day-to-day life in classrooms. Understanding possibilities for families and communities to influence efforts to reform instructional organization and management — and understanding possibilities for states to support them in doing so — begins with understanding both the status quo that recent policies and philanthropic initiatives seek to disrupt and the ways in which districts are responding.

## American Defaults

From their founding deep in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, public school districts did much more to set the stage for instruction than to actively organize and manage it. Over this period, the default American public school district evolved to take a conventional, hierarchical form: a geographically-defined enterprise featuring a central office and feeder patterns of elementary, middle, and high schools, all operating under the oversight of an elected school board. The default approach to instructional organization and management, in turn, was one of sorting, resourcing, and delegating.<sup>2</sup> Central offices sorted students into neighborhood schools, and schools sorted students into classes, academic tracks, and remedial/compensatory programs. Central offices and schools then resourced those instructional venues (e.g., general education, college preparatory education, vocational education, and special education) with teachers, curriculum frameworks, textbooks, and other instructional materials. Individual teachers were delegated primary responsibility for organizing and managing the day-to-day specifics of instruction for the students assigned to them using the resources afforded them.

This default approach to instructional organization and management was responsive to many influences operating on and in public school districts. For example, providing teachers formidable discretion in organizing and managing instruction created opportunities for them to manage uncertainties inherent in day-to-day classroom work and to attend to differences in educational aspirations and values among students and families.<sup>3</sup> This default approach was also responsive to widely held assumptions about the relationship between resources and learning. Educators, reformers, and policy makers largely assumed that if students were exposed to teachers and books in schools, they would learn; if students were exposed to more and better teachers and books, they would learn more and better.<sup>4</sup> This assumption drove social movements, court decisions, and public policies that pressed for universal access to public schools, compulsory attendance, the incubation and diffusion of new instructional resources, and the equitable distribution of resources within and among schools.<sup>5</sup>

This default approach to instructional organization and management was also deeply problematic. For example, many poor and minority students were sorted into neighborhood schools segregated by race, ethnicity, and class; into low-level academic and vocational tracks; and into remedial supplemental/categorical programs uncoordinated with regular classroom instruction.<sup>6</sup> Expectations and responsibility for their learning were often lowered at each turn. Many classrooms were resourced with incoherent collections of instructional resources selected by central offices and schools more in response to policies and fads in their environments and less in response to students' specific educational needs.<sup>7</sup> And many teachers isolated from colleagues in their own private classrooms struggled to learn how to use these resources effectively in their own practice.<sup>8</sup> With that, low-level instruction became the default, as teachers either refashioned or ignored new instructional resources and carried on largely as they, themselves, were taught: by focusing on basic facts and skills using didactic, teacher-centered instructional approaches.

These problems owed much to deeply-rooted racism, xenophobia, and sexism (as well as to beliefs about innate differences in intelligence and intellectual ability) that often led to discrimination among students on the basis of gender, religion, race, ethnicity, social class,

and/or disability. They also owed much to federal and state education policies that located causes of low-level achievement in students, rather than in districts or schools as organizations; that legitimized the categorization of students (e.g., as behaviorally challenged, language impaired, physically impaired, or learning impaired); and that segregated students into special education and other remedial classes. Moreover, these same policies often provided supplemental funding for districts and schools on the requirement that it be used to provide targeted resources and services to students in these categories and not to improve districts and schools as a whole.

Thus, rather than advancing excellence and equity, results of these policies included reinforcing the default approach to instructional organization and management and exacerbating its adverse effects. They also included buffering districts and schools as a whole from efforts to improve the educational opportunities and outcomes of historically-marginalized students.

## **New Ambitions**

Beginning in earnest in the early 1990s with the onset of the systemic reform movement and continuing to the present, a combination of federal policies, state policies, and philanthropic initiatives have aimed to reform the organization and management of instruction in public school districts, with central offices and schools pressed to assume responsibility for improving students' educational experiences and outcomes on average and for reducing disparities among them.<sup>9</sup> This includes policy rhetoric pushing for deeper learning, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, and ambitious instruction; the use of state-level standards and assessments to hold districts and schools accountable for improving instruction and students outcomes; the introduction of school choice within and between districts to create market-like incentives for improvement; increased emphasis on the use of data and research to manage and evaluate improvement efforts; and increased emphasis on the professional preparation and quality of teachers.

These policies and philanthropic initiatives have hardly been coherent, monolithic, and stable but, instead, variably coordinated, evolving, and dynamic in and among states and districts. Moreover, they have been advanced amidst (and in interaction with) the legacy of past policies and initiatives that reinforced the American default approach to instructional organization and management, with deeply institutionalized constituencies, structures, values, and beliefs still pulling strongly in that direction.<sup>10</sup>

Even so, one effect of this sustained, decades-long press has been the emergence of new categories of public school districts; e.g., state takeover districts, turnaround zones, and charter school networks that operate in interaction (and, sometimes, in competition) with conventional urban, suburban, and rural districts. Another effect has been the emergence of new domains of work in central offices and schools that have them going well beyond sorting-resourcing-and-delegating to actively organizing and managing classroom instruction to improve educational quality and to reduce disparities.<sup>11</sup> These include:

- *Managing environmental relationships* to selectively bridge, buffer, and reconcile among variably coordinated, evolving, and dynamic influences and resources

that bear on how the district understands and pursues high-quality classroom instruction; e.g., family/community aspirations and values, federal and state policies, philanthropists' agendas, and educational research and resources.<sup>12</sup>

- *Building educational infrastructure* that coordinates visions for instructional practice, formal instructional resources (e.g., instructional models, curricula, and assessments), and social instructional resources (e.g., understandings, norms, values, and relationships among teachers, leaders, and students).<sup>13</sup>
- *Supporting the use of educational infrastructure in practice* by developing teachers' professional knowledge and capabilities through such means as workshops, practice-based coaching and mentoring, and collegial learning.<sup>14</sup>
- *Managing performance* both for continuous improvement (e.g., via iterative, evidence-driven design, implementation, and evaluation) and for accountability (e.g., via the use of evidence and standards to assess instructional processes and outcomes).<sup>15</sup>
- *Distributing instructional leadership* beyond established administrative roles to new leadership roles and teams responsible for performing, coordinating, and managing all of the preceding.<sup>16</sup>

Research-based frameworks guiding the reform of public school districts hold that the more attention to (and coordination among) these emerging domains of work, the farther districts move toward functioning as coherent, instructional-focused education systems able to support all teachers and students in working together in new ways, toward more ambitious goals, and to greater effect.<sup>17</sup>

## Literature Review

From one perspective, the preceding has many public school districts evolving in positive ways: again, by organizing and managing instruction to improve overall quality and to reduce disparities. From another perspective, the preceding also risks new problems. In public school districts with deep traditions of local democratic control, federal policies, state policies, and philanthropic initiatives are interacting to influence how public school districts define and pursue high-quality instruction for all students.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, districts have become increasingly dependent on publishers, non-governmental organizations, grant-funded projects, and entrepreneurs to provide the technical resources and supports needed to respond quickly and effectively.<sup>19</sup>

Families and communities seeking to assert influence to ensure that their educational values and aspirations are integral to their students' day-to-day educational experiences face at least two challenges. The first is to organize effectively to exercise collective voice in active, complex reform contexts in which influence is traded at the level of organizations (and not individuals). This is especially the case for historically marginalized families and communities that have long struggled to assert influence.<sup>20</sup> The second – which we explore further here – is to understand different ways that public school districts are reforming instructional organization and management so that family/community organizations can strategically direct their efforts.

Toward understanding emerging approaches to instructional organization and management, we conducted a comprehensive review of the research literature on conventional public school districts (urban, suburban, and rural) and alternative public school districts (state takeover districts, turnaround zones, and charter school networks). We began by searching the ERIC database for peer-reviewed research using a standard set of keywords related to organizing and managing instruction in new ways (e.g., system, organization, district, network, local education agency, instruction, or teaching). We also identified books on district reform from academic presses and commissioned reports that met rigorous quality criteria. This search yielded over 1700 sources. We continued by reviewing titles and abstracts to identify sources that focused on comprehensive improvement initiatives in districts and schools (vs. targeted interventions).

The preceding yielded 205 sources that became the primary focus of our review. We then coded those sources using the domains of work identified above (i.e., managing environmental relationships, building infrastructure, supporting use, managing performance, and distributing instructional leadership), with the aim of identifying patterns in the ways that responsibility for these domains of work are being distributed among central offices and schools. As patterns emerged, we drew on theories of (and strategies for) organizing and managing instruction in districts and schools for principles and language to sharpen our rendering of them. We established reliability in our initial reduction of sources and our subsequent analysis by selecting subsets of resources, analyzing and coding them independently, and comparing and reconciling interpretations.

Working in this way, we identified four primary types of education systems: managerial systems, market-driven systems, federated systems, and networked systems. Each has a characteristic theory of action relating new approaches to instructional organizational and management to improved educational quality and reduced disparities. Each associates closely with specific strategies for organizing and managing instruction that have gained or maintained currency since the mid-1990s. And each has a characteristic distribution of work among central offices and schools.<sup>21</sup>

Our argument is not these four types exist in pure form in practice. Rather, our argument is that, taken together, these four system types function as an analytic framework for interpreting efforts to reform instructional organization and management in a given public school district.

## **Managerial Education System**

A managerial education system is characterized by a standard educational approach developed by the central office and administered consistently, district-wide. The theory of action is that the consistent, district-wide use of a high-quality educational approach will improve educational opportunities and outcomes on average while also reducing disparities between schools and classrooms. A managerial education system operates in accord with strategies for organizing and managing instruction that feature hierarchical role relationships and procedural work controls.<sup>22</sup>

In a managerial education system, primary responsibility for building educational infrastructure lies in the central office: devising an instructional vision; developing or acquiring formal resources that provide detailed guidance for practice (supported by evidence of effectiveness); and developing norms that encourage “working within the system.” The work of managing environmental relationships focuses on discerning state accountability requirements and resources for meeting them, as well as engaging families and communities to build buy-in around centrally-developed infrastructure. The central office supports schools in using this educational infrastructure through professional development and coaching, with performance management focused primarily on holding schools accountable to standards for classroom practice and for bottom-line results. These activities require that central offices take instructional leadership for instructional design, professional development, and assessment and evaluation.

The breadth of instructional leadership in the central office narrows the scope of instructional leadership in schools, with principals (along with their associates and assistants) functioning as agents of the central office in administering centrally-designed educational infrastructure. The primary focus of school administrators is to support the use of centrally-developed educational infrastructure in practice, with performance management focused again on faithful use and bottom-line results. Infrastructure-building and environmental management focus on cultivating understanding and buy-in of central offices decisions and designs among teachers, families, and community members.

The pattern of activity that characterizes a managerial education system first emerged from our review of accounts and critiques of reform efforts in urban public school districts at the onset of standards and accountability.<sup>23</sup> This pattern was also evident in accounts of urban districts transitioning to standardized curricula coupled with high-stakes assessments; in accounts of instructional improvement in large, fragmented, historically-bureaucratic school districts; and in accounts of charter school networks that feature standardized instructional visions absent affordances for school-level adaptation.<sup>24</sup>

## **Market-Driven Education System**

While a managerial education system is characterized by a standard educational approach, a market-driven education system is characterized by the differentiation of educational approaches among schools, with families and communities advocating for (and choosing among) schools that are aligned with their educational values and aspirations. The theory of action is that introducing market competition while reducing central office control will stimulate school-level entrepreneurship and innovation aimed at improving quality and reducing disparities in ways responsive to families, communities, and broader policy pressures. A market-driven education system operates in accord with many principles of portfolio management as a strategy for reforming public school districts.<sup>25</sup>

Where the central office of a managerial system is the primary locus of educational design activity, the central office of a market-driven system functions more as an arbiter of school-level design activity. Key functions of the central office are to manage relationships with communities (to ensure educational alternatives responsive to diverse aspirations and

values) and policy environments (to establish achievement targets for schools). Performance management focuses on holding schools accountable for meeting enrollment and achievement targets, reconstituting or closing those that do not, and constituting new schools as alternatives. These activities focus central office instructional leadership primarily on monitoring community and policy environments, goal setting, and evaluation.

In contrast to administering centrally-designed educational infrastructure (as in a managerial education system), schools in a market-driven education system have primary responsibility for building educational infrastructure. They devise a school-specific instructional vision, create or acquire formal resources that support that vision, and cultivate a social organization that balances innovation and creativity with family/community responsiveness. That, in turn, places a premium on managing environmental relationships to discern the aspirations and values of families/communities and supporting the use of infrastructure in practice to ensure that aspirations and values are represented in instruction. It also places a premium on managing performance both for continuous improvement (to iteratively refine infrastructure and supports for use) and accountability for bottom-line results (as set by the central office and choice-making families). These responsibilities require that schools develop all of the instructional leadership capabilities of the central office of a managerial education system, in addition to the marketing and advertising capabilities required of competitive markets.

The pattern of activity that characterizes a market-driven education system first emerged from our review of accounts of mayoral and state-directed district reform.<sup>26</sup> Though they blur lines with managerial and federated systems, this pattern was also evident in accounts of improvement efforts in urban districts that coordinate academic accountability with intra-district choice programs such as pilot schools, magnet schools, and charter schools.<sup>27</sup>

## **Federated Education System**

A federated education system is characterized by independence among schools in devising their educational approaches within parameters established by the central office, balanced by an ethos of community and cooperation (in contrast to the competition and accountability of market-driven systems). The theory of action is that knowledge, capabilities, and values in schools and communities are essential resources for organizing and managing instruction in ways that improve quality and reduce disparities, with the central office providing supports to enable success and structuring constraints to ensure a level of district-wide coherence. Thus, where managerial and market-driven systems locate primary responsibility for education design activity either in the central office or schools, a federated system features a more balanced distribution of design activity between central offices and schools. A federated education system operates in accord with principles of site-based/school-based management, distributed/participatory leadership, and commitment-oriented management strategies.<sup>28</sup>

Where a hallmark of a market-driven system is a lean central office with little or no capabilities to support instruction or its improvement, a federated education system shares the more extensive instructional leadership capabilities of a managerial system, though directed

at constraining (but not standardizing) educational approaches among schools. Infrastructure building focuses on establishing principles, frameworks, and guidance for school-level decision making (e.g., a district-wide educational mission, a curriculum scope-and-sequence, and core instructional values), though they can also include selecting infrastructure components to be used district-wide (e.g., an instructional model, textbook series, or assessment). That, in turn, has central offices managing environmental relationships to reconcile infrastructure-building efforts with policy expectations, externally-available resources, and family/community aspirations and values. Performance management focuses on supporting schools' use of centrally-developed resources, holding schools accountable for working within centrally-devised constraints, and sharing accountability for their success.

For schools in a federated education system, a common feature is a participatory leadership team that includes teachers, administrators, and, possibly, family and community representatives. With that, the work of managing environmental relationships goes beyond building buy-in and soliciting input (as with managerial and market-driven systems) to the possibility of incorporating family/community representation into school-level design activity, including devising school-specific educational infrastructure within bounds established by the central office. Efforts to support use and manage performance focus on (a) working collegially to realize school-specific educational aspirations and values in classroom instruction and (b) working iteratively and collaboratively to refine educational infrastructure and supports for use.

The pattern of activity that characterizes a federated education system first emerged in our review of accounts of the decentralization reforms in the Chicago Public Schools, where local communities were given high levels of autonomy over schools.<sup>29</sup> This pattern of activity was also evident in accounts of improvement efforts in suburban districts that blend central office guidance with school-level decision making; in accounts of improvement efforts featuring school-level instructional leadership and mentoring; and in accounts of central offices buffering schools from environmental turbulence to support school-level instructional improvement.<sup>30</sup>

## **Networked Education System**

Like a managerial system, a networked education system features a common, district-wide educational approach. However, in contrast to the standardization-and-administration that characterizes managerial systems, a networked education system is characterized by the central office and schools collaborating to develop, use, and refine a conventional, district-wide educational approach. The theory of action is that establishing, maintaining, and continuously refining common ways of working, district-wide, creates potential both to elevate the quality of routine educational work consistently across schools and to address particular educational needs and problems among schools, classrooms, and students (thereby reducing disparities). A networked education system operates in accord with principles of evolutionary learning systems, networked improvement communities, and design-based improvement.<sup>31</sup>

As in a managerial system, the central office in a networked system has primary responsibil-

ity for building and maintaining conventional, district-wide educational infrastructure. Efforts to support use balance faithful implementation (to establish conventional, high-quality classroom instruction, district-wide) and school-level discretion (to address school-specific needs and problems). In contrast to the accountability focus of managerial systems, performance management focuses on continuous improvement, with the central office leveraging school-level adaptations as a resource for refining educational infrastructure and supports for use. Managing environmental relationships focuses chiefly on identifying research and research-based resources to inform design activity, with outreach to families and communities focused on building buy-in around the district-wide educational approach. These responsibilities require many of the instructional leadership capabilities of managerial and federated education systems, complemented by capabilities to manage distributed, collaborative learning and improvement.

With the central office responsible for building and maintaining educational infrastructure, schools focus most centrally on supporting the use of infrastructure and managing performance in ways that parallel the work of the central office. Efforts to support use balance conventions (to maintain district-wide coherence and quality) with discretion (to address school-specific needs and problems). Performance management focuses on the use of iterative, continuous improvement cycles to structure collegial problem-solving and adaptation, with positive adaptations fed back to the central office for potential use, district-wide. In schools, the work of managing environmental relationships involves building buy-in around the district-wide educational approach and engaging families and communities in adapting that approach to the local context. With that, school-level instructional leadership focuses on practice-based professional learning and problem-solving, family/community outreach, and evidence-based continuous improvement.

The pattern of activity that characterizes a networked education system first emerged from our review of district and school improvement featuring different forms of research-practice partnerships that draw on principles of design and continuous improvement.<sup>32</sup> This pattern was also evident in accounts of charter school networks, urban districts, and suburban districts that coordinate detailed, district-wide instructional visions with opportunities and support for school-level adaptation and feedback.<sup>33</sup>

## Discussion

Thus, a comprehensive review of the research literature suggests that many public school districts are evolving as education systems that organize and manage instruction in accord with four primary types: managerial systems, market-driven systems, federated systems, and networked systems. Even so, any given district is unlikely to be a perfect manifestation of any given type. Rather, most districts are likely to be works in progress, as they begin engaging, mastering, and coordinating new domains of work in central offices and schools. Moreover, it is possible for a given district to pursue different approaches to organizing and managing instruction in different contexts: e.g., in different content areas; in general education, special education, and supplemental/compensatory education; in elementary, middle, and high schools; in neighborhood schools and magnet schools; and in low and high performing schools. Lastly, deeply institutionalized constituencies, structures, and values

may still be pulling some districts toward the American default of sort-resourcing-and-delegating.

The preceding suggests complex terms of engagement for families and community interests seeking to ensure that their educational aspirations and values are integral to students' day-to-day lives in classrooms. These terms grow more complex when considering that each of these systems types will likely have central offices and schools transacting with public and private grant programs, commercial providers, non-profit organizations, and other external organizations to secure the resources and services needed to enact new domains of work, with these external organizations likely to be variably open to engaging families and communities in their work with central offices and schools.

The terms grow still more complex when considering difficulties that historically-marginalized family and community interests with limited financial and political resources encounter in efforts to assert influence on public school districts, oftentimes in competition with louder and better-resourced constituencies. These difficulties play out whether engaging central office politics or improvement efforts (i.e., in a managerial or networked system), leveraging school choice (i.e., in a market system), or engaging school-level improvement activities (central to market, federated, and networked systems).<sup>34</sup>

One challenge, again, is for families and communities to organize in order to exercise a collective (and louder) voice than any single family or community interest could exercise on its own. Another challenge for family/community organizations is to go beyond "in principle" understandings of these different types of education systems to discern how, specifically, their own districts are organizing and managing instruction; that is, to identify how new domains of work are being distributed among central offices and schools as they collaborate to improve instruction in different contexts. That, in turn, would support family/community organizations in aligning their influence efforts with the work of their districts.

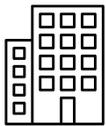
One way to begin is to discern the general approach or theory of action that is guiding improvement and, thus, the type of education system toward which their district may be evolving. For example:

- A district pursuing a standard educational approach district-wide, in which schools are held accountable for fidelity of implementation, is likely evolving in the direction of a managerial education system.
- A district seeking to stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship in educational approaches among schools, to introduce choice, and to hold schools accountable both to market competition and to state accountability requirements is likely evolving in the direction of a market-driven education system.
- A district in which the central office supports schools in valuing, cultivating, and leveraging community as a resource for school-centered educational improvement is likely evolving in the direction of a federated education system.
- A district in which the central office and schools collaborate to develop, use, and adapt a conventional, district-wide educational approach is likely evolving in the direction of a networked education system.

The type of education system toward which the district is evolving, in turn, provides insights into how responsibilities for instructional organization and management may be distributed among central offices and schools — and, with that, insights into how family/community organizations can align their efforts to assert influence.

For example, see Table 1, which charts the distribution of responsibilities for instructional organization and management for the four types of education systems.

Table 1: Distribution of Responsibilities for Instructional Organization and Management

Locus of Work	Domain of Work	Managerial System	Market-driven System	Federated System	Networked System
 <b>Central Office</b>	Managing Environmental Relationships				
	Building Infrastructure				
	Supporting Use				
	Managing Performance				
	Distributing Instructional Leadership				
 <b>School</b>	Managing Environmental Relationships				
	Building Infrastructure				
	Supporting Use				
	Managing Performance				
	Distributing Instructional Leadership				

**Key:**



**Dark green with three cogs:** Primary responsibility for the work.



**Light green with two cogs:** Some responsibility for the work.



**Light gray with one cog:** Little or no responsibility for the work.

The dark green shading marks domains of work for which the central office or schools have primary responsibility – and, thus, that provide a primary point of leverage for family/community organizations. The light green shading marks domains of work for which the central office or schools have some responsibility – and, thus, that provide a secondary point of leverage for family/community organizations. The light gray shading marks domains of work for which the central office or schools have little or no responsibility – and, thus, that serve as a weak point of leverage for family/community organizations.

For districts evolving as market-driven systems, schools (vs. central offices) present as a primary point of leverage. For example, family/community organizations could support families in choosing among schools that embrace their educational aspirations and values and, possibly, in addressing transportation and other challenges that complicate exercising choice. They could also assert influence on the construction of leadership roles that serve as liaisons with families and the community; on ways that schools draw on environments for technical support; on the construction of infrastructure responsive to family/community aspirations and values; and on ways that schools support teachers in using this infrastructure with their students. That said, central offices do provide two possible points of leverage via their efforts (a) to engage families and communities in deciding on types of schools to open, and (b) to establish performance and attendance metrics to which schools will be held accountable. Otherwise, central offices in market-driven systems have little responsibility (by design) for organizing and managing instruction.

*The type of education system toward which the district is evolving provides insights into how family/community organizations can align their efforts to assert influence.*

For districts evolving as federated systems, primary points of leverage are distributed among central offices and schools, with the former establishing the broad parameters of instruction and the latter refining and operationalizing it in classrooms. For example, family/community organizations could assert influence on ways in which central offices interpret and operational-

ize state and federal expectations for student learning and school improvement; decisions about key infrastructure components and performance metrics; and support provided to schools to develop instructional leadership and to use infrastructure in classrooms. With its emphasis on community as a resource for improvement, family/community organizations could then work directly with schools to establish school-specific visions for instruction that reflect local values and aspirations; to further develop infrastructure in ways responsive to local aspirations and values; to press schools to support teachers and students in using infrastructure; and to establish processes and criteria for monitoring and improving performance.

For districts evolving as networked systems, primary points of leverage are again distributed among the central office and schools. For example, family/community organizations could assert influences on the central office to ensure that local aspirations and values are represented in district-wide visions for instruction; in the educational infrastructure to be used district-wide to guide instructional practice; and in the ways that the central office respects and leverages school-level adaptations in continuously improving the district-wide educational approach. They could also influence how the central office balances state and feder-

al requirements with community aspirations and values. Family/community organizations would also seek to influence efforts in schools to use and evaluate educational infrastructure; to adapt it in response to local values, aspirations, and needs; and to provide feedback to the central office.

Lastly, family/community organizations have the potential not only to assert influence *within* these different education systems but, also, *on* district decisions to pursue these different types of systems, as the choice of system type does much to establish the terms of family/community engagement. For example, if families and communities do not value (or if they struggle to leverage) choice but, instead, seek deep engagement in improvement activities in their students' schools, family/community organizations could assert influence on the central office to move away from a market-driven system toward a federated system. Alternatively, if families and communities value a centralized instructional approach while also valuing school-level adaptation, family/community organizations could assert influence aimed at evolving beyond a managerial system to a networked system. Finally, if their district is holding fast to the American default approach of sorting-resourcing-and-delegating, family/community organizations could press the central office and schools to take on the work of actively organizing and managing instruction to improve educational quality and to reduce disparities.

## Recommendations

Thus, the preceding analysis suggests that a sustained, 30-year press from federal policies, state policies, and philanthropic initiatives is both disrupting a deeply institutionalized (and highly problematic) pattern of instructional organization and management in public school districts and driving the emergence of new patterns aimed at improving educational experiences and outcomes on average while reducing disparities between them. Even so, this progress risks both complicating local democratic control and exacerbating challenges faced by historically-marginalized families and communities in advocating on behalf of their students. Toward supporting them in exercising voice, the preceding analysis identifies specific possibilities for family/community organizations to assert influence on public school districts with the aim of ensuring that their educational aspirations and values are represented in their students' day-to-day life in classrooms.

Clearly, even with the guidance that it provides, the preceding analysis does not obviate the challenges of historically-marginalized families and communities in positively influencing district efforts to reform instructional organization and management. Moreover, the preceding analysis only goes as far as identifying a typology of education systems, leaving open questions about the effectiveness of different system types in improving educational opportunities and outcomes and reducing disparities in different district, school, and community contexts. Building on the preceding analysis, additional research is needed that examines strengths and weaknesses in how (and in what contexts, and under what circumstances) the different system types (a) support instructional improvement, (b) address students opportunity gaps, (d) improve achievement and reduce disparities, and (d) engage families and communities.

Moreover, whether and how the district-level dynamics detailed above continue to play out in the near term is an open question. Since the 1990s, successive reauthorizations of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act have been instrumental in catalyzing activity in states, districts, and non-governmental organizations aimed at improving instruction, its organization, and its management. The most recent reauthorization — the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) — has potential to do the same. ESSA maintains a keen focus on state-level accountability for improving academic achievement on average and reducing disparities while also incentivizing states and districts to engage families and communities more deeply in district and school improvement. ESSA is also designed to give states more latitude in devising their approaches to accountability and improvement, including moving away from a narrow focus on student achievement as an outcome and instruction as the central focus of school improvement.

Thus, ESSA opens up new opportunities for states to press public school districts to focus on such essential matters as improving attendance, school climate, and graduation rates. However, it is possible for districts to successfully address such matters without doing anything to improve the quality of the day-to-day educational work of teachers and students in classrooms, six hours or more per day, 180 days or more per year, for 12 or more years. Further, since time, attention, and money are finite resources, a risk is that pressing public school districts to address such matters will have states reducing the press on public school districts to improve both instruction and the organization and management of instruction. Finally, while states and districts could leverage ESSA to increase family and community engagement, they could just as easily treat family and community engagement as a compliance exercise that has little bearing on students' day-to-day lives in classrooms.

Thus, as they leverage new flexibility afforded them by ESSA, this analysis of historical and contemporary research suggests the following recommendations for states committed to sustaining progress toward new patterns of instructional organization and management in public school districts while also expanding the influence of family/community organizations:

- Sustain the state-level press to improve instruction, its organization, and its management both to make progress in improving outcomes and closing gaps and to prevent a regression to the harmful effects of the American default.
- Support districts in understanding where and how family/community organizations can contribute to efforts to organize and manage instruction in new ways.
- Support families and communities in engaging district reform efforts by providing guidance and resources for organizing themselves, for analyzing efforts in districts to organize and manage instruction in new ways, and for asserting influence.
- Carefully study the evolution of instructional organization and management with the goal of understanding (a) shifts toward the four types of education systems identified in this analysis, (b) the emergence of different types of systems not yet evident in the literature, and (c) the strengths and weaknesses of each in specific district and school contexts.

## Notes and References

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- 2 See the following for the full explication of the sorting-resourcing-and-delegating default:  
  
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