

RESEARCH UTILIZATION BRIEFS:

INVESTING IN STAFF RESOURCES FOR LEARNING IMPROVEMENT



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Most urban schools and districts face four interrelated challenges regarding the quality of their teacher and administrator workforce: (1) maximizing the quality and longevity of teaching and administrative staff in “high-needs,” typically hard to staff, schools; (2) deploying and supporting generally high proportions of novice teachers and principals; (3) developing and sustaining effective instructional leadership teams; and (4) matching the diversity of the student population with corresponding diversity in the school staff.

This Research Brief summarizes findings about challenges in high-needs, urban schools that prompted school leaders to invest staffing resources differently than in that past, and the frameworks they constructed to guide these decisions intended to promote improved learning. The two-year study, sponsored by The Wallace Foundation, focused on 14 schools in four urban districts – the Atlanta Public Schools, the New York City Department of Education/ Empowerment Schools Organization, the Portland Public Schools, and Lane County District 4J in Eugene, Oregon (Plecki et al., 2009). Also examined were strategies employed to bring staffing resources to bear more directly on improved, equitable learning outcomes for all students as well as those used to sustain support for these differential investments in pursuit of greater equity.

INVESTMENT FRAMEWORKS & TARGETS

Focusing on what it means to invest staffing resources in pursuit of learning improvement, the study found mandated, negotiated, incentive-based and market-based (or market-like) “investment frameworks” that influenced specific investment decisions in three target areas:

- Instructional leadership within and across schools;
- Data-based practice; and,

- Increasing capacity, flexibility and support for school-level investment.

The most straightforward investments in instructional leadership were the creation of district-level positions such as instructional coaches, achievement coordinators, and data and assessment specialists who serve the instructional goals of multiple schools. These positions were funded through new revenues or a re-examination and re-purposing of existing staffing resources. But filling these positions was not a guarantee that instructional leadership would be exercised effectively. In fact, investments of additional resources, combined with organizational changes were needed to realize the potential of this instructional support. For example, investments in data-based practice helped to engage instructional staff and other key staff members in focused, structured, and continuous inquiry about the learning improvement challenges they faced, often resulting in purposeful efforts to address a particular problem.

Finally, a leader’s flexibility and autonomy to invest, allocate or reallocate resources, at the school or district level, offers supportive conditions to meet school-specific performance objectives, potentially within a more accelerated time frame. Principals relied on existing resources allocated to their schools—and the flexibility granted them—to create alternative staffing or instructional support arrangements. Central office officials made use of flexible resources in ways that affected their approach to exercising or supporting instructional leadership—generally developing a more responsive relationship with schools.

INVESTING FOR EQUITY

Investing scarce resources to improve instruction required negotiating among competing interests, which in turn necessitated state, district and school leaders to consider

notions of *equity and fairness*. The challenge leaders confronted was to invest staffing resources to meet the unique needs of students, teachers, and schools while simultaneously maximizing instructional goals and developing politically sustainable strategies for doing so.

School leaders and other stakeholders must come to terms with definitions of equality, equity and fairness because equitable learning improvement means more than just equalizing resources, opportunities or treatment. To realize an equity agenda, resources are often differentially invested. For example, students who have been historically underserved and hard-to-staff schools often require greater investments in staffing. But such differential investments in the name of equity are likely to encounter resistance from stakeholders who have traditionally been advantaged by existing systems. The study revealed three strategies to help leaders adjudicate competing notions regarding “what is fair”:

- Adopt a long time horizon for planning equity-related investments;
- Continue to shepherd equity conversations over time, while taking action on steps that are feasible; and,
- Anticipate and persevere in the face of inevitable pushback.

Ultimately, the pursuit of equity goals requires a long-term investment perspective and processes that unfold over years. A long-term investment strategy offers schools and districts opportunities to deal with periods of compressed fiscal resources more effectively. In fact, most of the sites studied had experienced retrenchment in recent years, and as a consequence had used these occasions for creative improvisation on what they had been doing before.

OPPORTUNITIES IN CHALLENGING TIMES

Current financial pressures provide the opportunity for leaders to critically examine their investments in staffing resources and consider ways in which resources can be shifted, reallocated, or repurposed with a more strategic scope or focus. But the challenge of finding the most equitable way of proceeding still remains, even if the main business of the day is making cuts.

Strategic, coherent actions to improve student learning equitably, with scaffolds for improved leadership knowledge and skills exist. However, a prominent unsolved problem concerns support for systemic and sustainable leadership action. Educational leaders tend to think about support and investments for students and teachers, but less frequently about developing an accompanying aligned system of leadership support related to the changes made

in individual work responsibilities, supervisory relationships, or organizational structures.

A second unresolved problem resides in the politics of resource investment. Anticipating the “push-back” to differentially targeting or reallocating resources from a variety of sources and then finding the political will to stand up to it is a major issue. Sustaining changes may be more challenging than the initial conceptualization and implementation of leadership actions regarding the types of investment strategies to pursue.

Finally, learning to think in investment terms, managing the politics of differential investment, and keeping investments focused on learning improvement are a “curriculum” for developing leaders that preparation programs and districts may not be offering. In essence, a “knowledge gap” needs to be bridged so that leaders are supported in their effort to engage in actions that will produce improved and equitable learning results for all children.

REFERENCE

Plecki, M., Knapp, M., Castaneda, T., Halverson, T., LaSota, R. & Lochmiller, C. (2009). *How leaders invest staffing resources for learning improvement*. Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching & Policy, University of Washington.



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This brief, developed by Stephen Jacobson, is part of the Research Utilization Brief series co-sponsored by UCEA and The Wallace Foundation. The intent of the series is to highlight and share recent empirical research on effective leadership preparation and development, particularly Wallace-commissioned research, with stakeholders who are in positions to use this research to make positive changes. Please visit Wallace’s online *Knowledge Center* (www.wallacefoundation.org) to access the full research report and other important resources.

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