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# Transforming School District Human Resource Departments

## Summary

Today's policy debates about teachers tend to focus on No Child Left Behind's call for highly qualified teachers or on disputes over current teacher certification requirements. The behind-the-scenes work of school district human resource (HR) departments, by contrast, is rarely part of the discussion.

And yet the quality of a district's HR department can determine whether qualified teacher candidates make it to the classroom, or slip through the cracks. District HR can actively support principals who are being held accountable for performance and instructional quality, or provide them with little more than perfunctory administrative support. Superintendents and school board members who care about teacher quality and district-wide reform cannot ignore the quality of their human resource departments. Instead, they can help build the capacity of their HR department and change its role and structure to better support their reform strategy.

To help education leaders think about improving this important back office function, the Center on Reinventing Public Education studied three complex urban districts actively engaged in reshaping their HR departments. A central

conclusion of the report, *From Bystander to Ally*, is that transforming the district HR office involves two things: substantial administrative reforms aimed at increasing department capacity and close attention from top district leadership.

The districts pursued substantial bureaucratic and administrative changes to improve their HR departments, from redesigning jobs in HR to revamping information technology systems. At the same time, it was clear that the success or failure of these administrative changes depended in large part on the actions of superintendents and other top district leaders. Without focused leadership to direct, support and sustain them, HR departments will, at best, be bystanders in efforts to improve public education, and, at worst, immovable barriers.

"Each of the elements we cover in the report – structure, personnel, technology, and leadership – may be a necessary ingredient for a successful transformation of HR," says researcher Christine Campbell, "but of them none alone is sufficient. Whether or not HR is able to transform itself has as much to do with the quality of leadership at the top of the district as with the management of the department."

## From Bystander To Ally

The report is based on 49 interviews with district and school personnel across three districts during the 2002-2003 school year – Houston Independent School District, Milwaukee Public Schools, and San Diego City Schools. Each of these districts was trying to strengthen principals' ability to mold and lead their instructional staffs, and, to varying degrees, sought to revamp their HR departments to better support this goal.

## Administrative Reforms

As they worked to reshape their HR departments, the districts pursued reforms that touched on three critical areas: the skills of the people in the department, the way the it was organized, and the tools it used to manage information.

- To address skill deficits, the districts hired new departmental leaders and provided training opportunities for current department staff; they hired new staff or reassigned veterans and brought in outside consultants.

# Transforming the School District Human Resource Department

- To provide schools with streamlined HR contacts, the districts redesigned jobs and changed the department's standing within the district hierarchy.
- To improve the flow of information within the department and between the department and schools, the districts made investments in information technology systems.

However, the districts' experiences also suggest that administrative reforms alone are no guarantee of change. When superintendents and board members fail to take an interest in HR and its work, transformation efforts can be haphazard and fail to stick.

## The District Leader's Role

Leaders can make a difference and “pay attention” to HR by:

- Framing the department's reform in the context of a broader vision for the district;
- Ensuring that adequate investments in professional capacity—starting with the department director—accompany new organizational structures in HR;
- Supporting difficult personnel decisions that arise with upgrading talents and skills in HR; and
- Committing long-term resources, both dollars and people, to information technology improvements.

The report concludes that although district central office departments like HR are often in the background when we talk about leaders and education, they should not be. As district and department leaders develop new ways of thinking about the HR function to better support improvement goals, they face the dual challenge of both improving the technical aspects of HR—e.g., the processing of paperwork—and transforming HR's role and mission to support district-wide reform efforts, especially reforms that envision principals as playing an enhanced role as on-site leaders.

## From Specialists to Generalists

As principals faced new expectations and responsibilities in San Diego and Houston, the districts saw a need to rethink how they organized work in their HR departments in order to support them as on-site leaders. In the past, principals had to talk to a cavalcade of HR department employees when it came time to fill vacant positions. An HR staffer with a long history in Houston remembered how “everybody in HR had his or her small job...it was an assembly line. You signed off on your piece of paper and you passed it on.” By the time a dossier made it to the filing room, “you had 12 signatures on it.”

To streamline this system to better support human resource decisions at the school level, Houston and San Diego took HR duties previously handled by multiple jobs in the department and assigned them to a newly created position, the HR generalist. This move to generalists fundamentally changed the way schools in both districts interacted with HR. For the first time, they had a single point of contact in HR. District officials in both cities spoke about the goal of this restructuring in the same terms – it was designed to provide “one-stop-shopping” for schools as they interacted with the HR department.

With the sponsorship of The Wallace Foundation's Education Leadership Initiative, “*From Bystander to Ally: Transforming the District Human Resources Department*” was authored by Christine Campbell, Michael DeArmond, and Abigail Schumwinger. The findings and recommendations are solely those of its authors. To download the report please visit [www.crpe.org](http://www.crpe.org). To learn more about The Wallace Foundation and their work in this and other fields, please visit [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).