District Central Office Leadership for Caring and Supportive Schools:
Findings and Suggestions for Building Capacity

Jeff Walls, Ph.D, Washington State University College of Education

College of Education

DISTRICT CENTRAL OFFICE LEADERSHIP FOR CARING AND SUPPORTIVE SCHOOLS:
FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR BUILDING CAPACITY

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this project was to explore how superintendents and district central offices work to support caring in schools. The intention was to gather information about what district personnel are doing, and what they feel are areas of strength and weakness.

In subsequent pages, I will describe the study in more depth and detail what I learned in my conversations. However, at the beginning I want to detail four key concepts that scholars have used to understand the work of schools and districts and how schools and districts work to get better at what they do. We will return to these concepts at the end.

This project took place during the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, care and social support was very much top of mind as schools and districts sought to help families deal with the ongoing crisis. The photographs and findings on subsequent pages reflect the extent to which the pandemic disrupted schooling, and changed leaders' thinking about what school could be.

STREET LEVEL BUREAUCRACY

Street Level Bureaucrats refers to public workers who are in the middle of policy work. They interact regularly with the public and make "on the ground" decisions about how policy gets translated to practice.

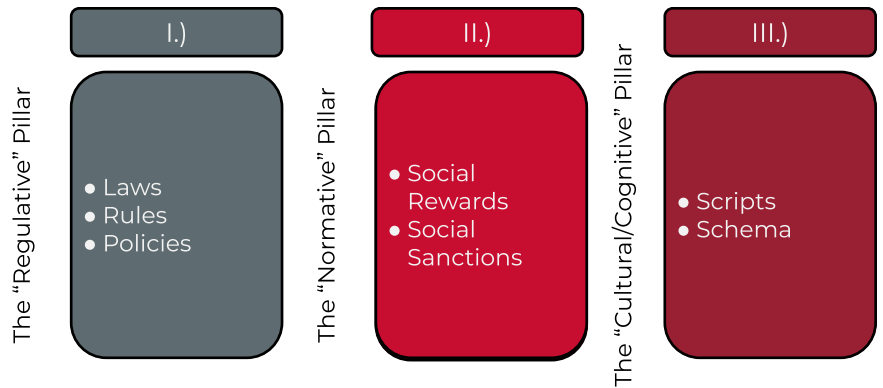Although these people exist within a hierarchy, they have a great deal of discretion in their day-to-day actions. Furthermore, they often have a high volume of work, and a great deal of ambiguity in choosing the best course of action. To cope, street level bureaucrats often find ways to build routines and systems, and seek to fit new demands or expectations into existing work (Honig, 2006; Lipsky, 1980).
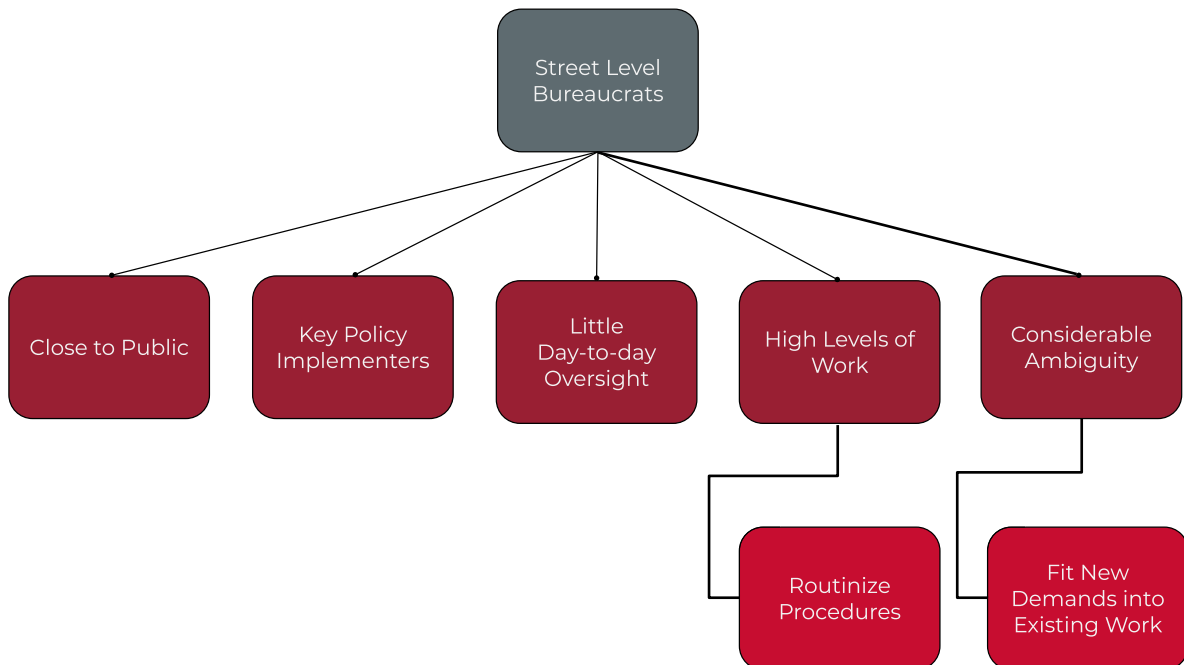
INSTITUTIONALISM

Schools are Institutions. They, "operate based on a set of beliefs, practices and structures that are long-held, value-laden and widely accepted as appropriate even when they may no longer accomplish desired functions or outcomes" (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2018) From an institutional perspective, much of what happens in schools is grounded not in utility maximization, but in legitimacy. Commonly, we think of legitimacy as coming from one of three pillars (Scott, 2008).
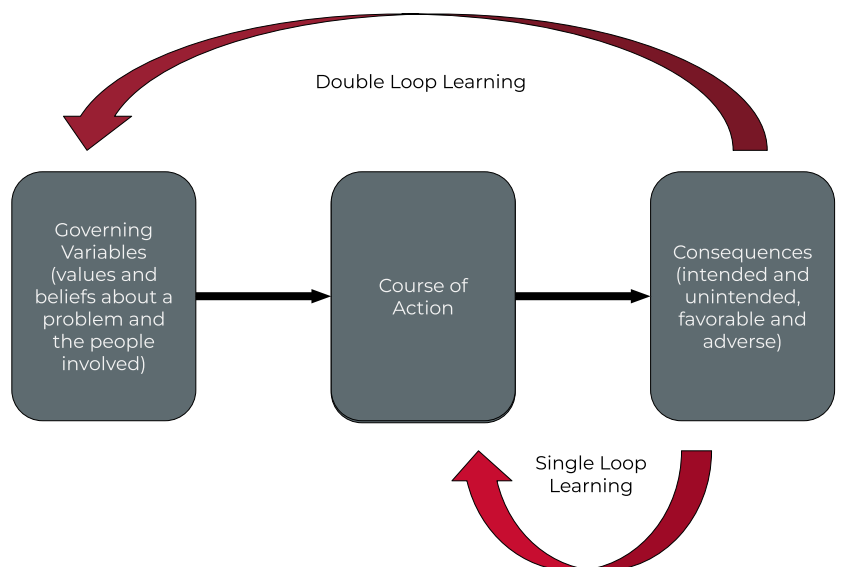
Institutional work is often characterized by a tension between a "logic of appropriateness," where people do what is expected of them based on their role, and a "logic of consequence," where people act based on what they hope to achieve. As one scholar wrote, "When decision makers follow a logic of appropriateness, they fit a situation to a particular identity. These decision makers will not ask, 'What is most efficient in this situation?' and choose that approach. Rather, they will ask, 'Who am I in this situation?' and 'What behaviors are appropriate to that identity in this particular situation?' and make their choices based on answers to those questions." (Honig, 2006, p. 362).

The "Regulative" Pillar

I.)
- Laws
- Rules
- Policies

The "Normative" Pillar

II.)
- Social Rewards
- Social Sanctions

The "Cultural/Cognitive" Pillar

III.)
- Scripts
- Schema

THEORIES OF ACTION (ESPOUSED THEORIES AND THEORIES IN USE)

The idea of a theory of action, at its simplest, is "given these circumstances, and this problem, what actions are likely to produce a desired result?" Two scholars (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Argyris, 1976, 1980) observed that frequently, the beliefs that people say drive their approach to a problem are not well aligned to their actions. They called the way people described their beliefs and actions "espoused theories" while the way people actually acted and the beliefs that implied "theories in use."

In addition to this observation about how people's actions and professed beliefs often do not align, Argyris and Schon noted that when their actions do not produce desired results, they try new courses of action (which they called "single loop learning"). If repeated courses of actions do not produce desired results, people may be better served by examining their underlying values and beliefs about a problem and the people involved (which they called "double loop learning"). However, it is difficult to examine one's underlying beliefs if one's actions and beliefs are misaligned in the first place.

Double Loop Learning

Governing Variables (values and beliefs about a problem and the people involved) → Course of Action → Consequences (intended and unintended, favorable and adverse)

Single Loop Learning

IMPROVEMENT SCIENCE

Improvement Science, adapted for education from use in healthcare, is an approach to systematically working toward improvement. It has six key tenets.

Much of the work in improvement science in education has been guided by Anthony Bryk and his colleagues (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & Lemahieu, 2015; Bryk, 2021). This work is underpinned by explicit and public hypotheses as to the nature of the problem, and a willingness to fail quickly and repeatedly to learn and improve (Bryk, 2021).
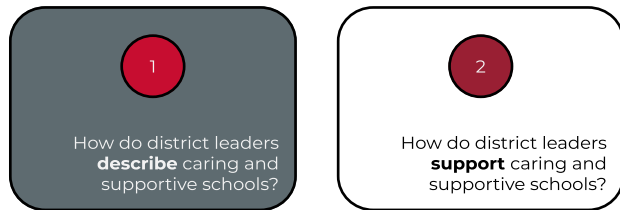
1.)	2.)	3.)	4.)	5.)	6.)
Improvement work is *problem specific* and *user centered*	Improvement focuses on *variation in performance* (not averages)	Improvement work sees outcomes as *produced by a system*	Improvement cannot be done at scale *unless it can be measured*	Disciplined inquiry drives improvement (*Plan, Do, Study, Act*)	*Networked Communities* accelerate learning
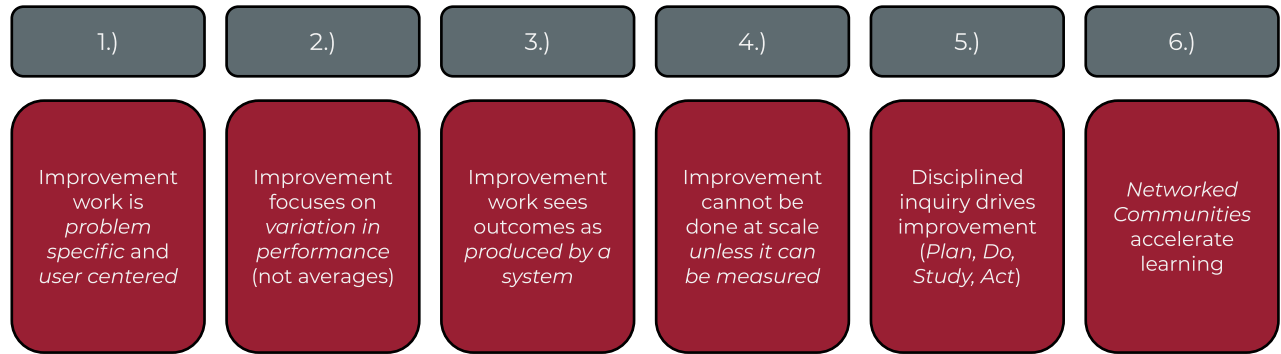
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study set out to examine two broad questions:

1 How do district leaders **describe** caring and supportive schools?

2 How do district leaders **support** caring and supportive schools?

I spoke to 26 district leaders (superintendent, assistant/associate superintendents, and student services personnel) in 13 districts. In some districts I only spoke to one person, while in others I spoke to two, three, or four. This included 14 men and 12 women. Demographic data on the districts is listed at right.

After completing these interviews, I "coded" the data by noting common themes and connections (and disconnections) amongst participants. The sections that follow describe what I found.

District	NCES Locale	Number of Students	% Students of Color	% Low SES	Personnel Interviewed
District 1	Suburb: Large	10,288	20.0%	28.7%	● Superintendent ● Student Services Director ● Special Services Director
District 2	City: Midsize	28,977	33.8%	41.0%	● Superintendent ● Student Services Director ● Special Services Coordinators
District 3	Town: Fringe	5,103	27.1%	49.3%	● Superintendent
District 4	City: Small	3,470	24.6%	53.3%	● Superintendent ● Assistant Superintendent
District 5	Rural: Distant	1,470	12.3%	48.2%	● Superintendent ● Principal/Former Special Services Director
District 6	Town: Distant	2,636	32.5%	29.6%	● Superintendent ● Assistant Superintendent
District 7	City: Small	3,807	23.0%	55.7%	● Superintendent ● Assistant Superintendent ● Student Services Director
District 8	Town: Fringe	1,830	25.6%	55.7%	● Superintendent ● Assistant Superintendent ● Student Services Director
District 9	Rural: Remote	153	8.5%	34.6%	● Superintendent
District 10	Rural: Distant	872	9.3%	20.9%	● Superintendent
District 11	City: Small	14,113	33.8%	41.0%	● Superintendent ● Assistant Superintendent
District 12	Rural: Fringe	2,564	11.2%	47.9%	● Superintendent
District 13	Town: Fringe	1,342	15.1%	27.3%	● Superintendent

WHAT DOES CARING LOOK LIKE IN SCHOOLS?

There were many descriptions of what makes schools caring and supportive places. In general, leaders described spaces that were happy, social, and safe. There was a sense that care was natural, and that creating more caring spaces is often about removing barriers and obstacles to care. In some areas, though, there were mixed ideas; for example, some leaders described active, chaotic learning spaces as caring, while others preferred calmer, more structured spaces.

> *It's about just that natural care and concern, and relationships, and positive adult relationships, and all those types of things. Sometimes we make it too complex in my opinion. As a teacher, it was just those things that you do naturally like you're going to build rapport with kids, you're going to support them, you're going to care for them, you're going to know what their situation is."*
> *(Superintendent)*

Students enjoying a socially distant PE class.

COMMON DESCRIPTIONS OF CARING

Common Descriptions of Caring Included:
- Smiles
- High level of interaction
- High Adult visibility and warm/welcoming interactions
- Student work on walls and in common spaces
- Close relationships and a sense of connection and community
- Schools that have a "buzz," a "vibe," or "energy"
- A sense of comfort and safety
- An emphasis on learning to care for one another
- Interactions that are enthusiastic

Some disagreements/lack of consensus on caring learning environment:
- "What looks like chaos in the classrooms"

vs.
- "Kids like structure" and "the school should feel calm"
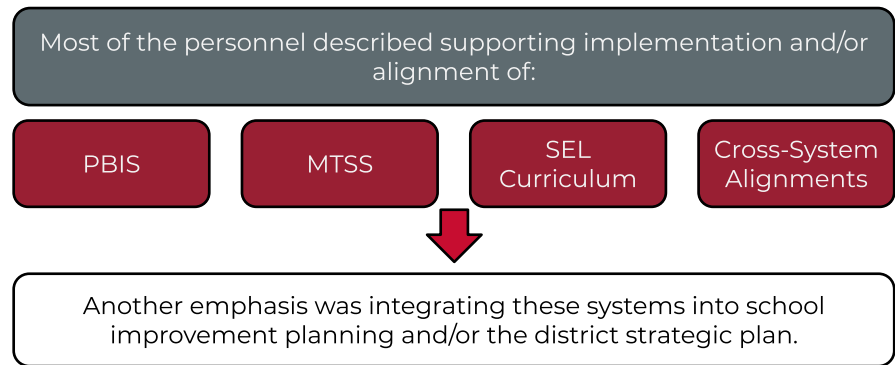

A student self-portrait early in the school year.

> *Sometimes it's about helping to remove barriers, so kids can be successful is. That's what the caring really is... A barrier sometimes is the academic press that we think we need to have all the time... I've started to be way more outspoken about state testing [during the pandemic]. Sometimes you have to have somebody like me who can say, 'Hey, wait. Let's take that off people's plates. There's no reason to do that.'" (Assistant Superintendent)*

Relationships and habits of gratitude were reported to be important elements of care amongst adults.

DISTRICT OFFICE SUPPORTS FOR CARING:
SYSTEMIC SUPPORTS

Most of the participants reflected on their role in supporting care via systemic supports (i.e., MTSS, PBIS, SEL curriculum, etc.).

Most of the personnel described supporting implementation and/or alignment of:

| PBIS | MTSS | SEL Curriculum | Cross-System Alignments |

Another emphasis was integrating these systems into school improvement planning and/or the district strategic plan.

> *Every year we have our school improvement plan. Within that plan, one of the goals is and will continue to be, around the care, and the social aspects of taking care of our kids. That looks different at an elementary than it does at the high school. We do a lot of training around ACES, primarily with our secondary folks. Then we have PBIS at our elementary and then a multitude of other pieces. That's not a canned process where we open the can and go. A lot of it is grassroots and homegrown. One thing that I would say that's consistent and complementary across the district is that the first goal is around the mental health and emotional wellbeing of our kids. That has become one of the goals and the board knows that it's coming. We invest in that." (Superintendent)*

DISTRICT OFFICE SUPPORTS FOR CARING:
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Another area of emphasis was on professional development and capacity building for staff members, especially in the areas of trauma informed instruction (i.e., ACES training) and training on discipline systems (e.g., Sound Discipline). These trainings often had an emphasis on getting educators "tools" or on "changing beliefs."

> *I think in professional development, one of the things that my job is to lead and guide our principals, or our TOSA's in providing that professional development for teachers...We've also spent a lot of time on training staff on social and emotional learning, on how to take care of themselves, how to build relationships with kids, how to identify their own triggers. It's really about building that toolkit for teachers, for themselves, so that they can be the best person they can be in front of those kids. I think, that's part of my role as far as professional development goes." (Student Services Director)*

The maintenance and facilities staff of one district cut shower boards to make personal whiteboards for students during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Students participating in the Kindness Crew.

DISTRICT OFFICE SUPPORTS FOR CARING:
RELATIONAL MODELLING

District leaders described how much of their work involved modelling care and support to school adults, especially administrators.

Most described district leadership modelling caring for administrators as a model for staff

Two said, "place your own mask over your face before assisting others"

Another superintendent noted, "if the adults aren't happy, the students aren't cared for"

For some, this involved understanding what to be "tight" on, but also what to be "loose" on (e.g., ending PD early after a hard week)

For others, simply emphasizing the importance of relationships (e.g., ending professional development by instructing people to "email three folks here and tell them what you appreciate about them")

> *That's back to the question you asked about, how do we support buildings.... Oftentimes in schools, it's additional bodies, it's hiring more people. In most schools, you're going to find it anywhere from probably at the very least 75% up to 85% of our cost, of our entire budget, is people. That's important because obviously, those are people that are making this work real for kids. Those MTSS structures can be resources... but the real resources are the right people in the right place." (Superintendent)*

DISTRICT OFFICE SUPPORTS FOR CARING:
PERSONNEL, AND PROBLEM-SOLVING

One way most district officials described supporting schools was through judicious hiring of personnel, both who to hire, and which positions to create and fill. Emphases in exactly who to hire were wide, and included:

- Counselors
- Mental Health Therapists
- Academic Support Specialists
- "Care Coaches"
- Restorative Discipline Specialists
- Hiring an Assistant Director of Teacher and Learning to focus on SEL
- Additional Dedicated staffing for Student Services (i.e., McKinney-Vento)

Finally, district leaders spoke about finding gaps in existing programs and systems, and finding ways to fill them. Examples included:

- Counselor affinity groups for students with particular challenges (i.e., going through divorce, lack of friendships)
- Partnerships to bolster family engagement and meet community needs (e.g., with health clinics and Boys & Girls clubs)
- Better supporting youth experiencing homelessness
- Finding ways to support average performing but disconnected students

> *With the economy and the needs of families and the mobility, and just all of those kinds of things, our community in particular is experiencing a huge shift in our population. Whole child support really means acknowledging the changes that are happening and then addressing those. That's why it was so important to put it into our strategic plan as an initiative because before that people were like, 'Oh, we don't have homelessness, we don't have diversity.' And just making it a district initiative brought it up to, 'This is what we work on. This is what we're about. This is what anchors us.' It's been really great to have it in the strategic plan."*
> *(Assistant Superintendent)*

One district administrator emphasized education as "heart work."

ENDURING LESSONS FOR CARING FROM COVID 19

Although the pandemic of the past two years has been stressful and awful for students, their families, and school personnel, there have been valuable lessons as well. The abrupt and extreme change in "how we do school" has spotlighted the important role that schools play in the ecosystem of care and support for students. District leaders highlighted numerous lessons learned, including:

- The pandemic exposed underlying challenges related to equity and the differential needs of families
- The importance of competence-based grading for understanding student learning
- Early and persistent outreach to families, including conferences before school begins
- Possibility that remote or hybrid may be the best option for some students in the future
- New options for community and staff engagement via video and social media
- New technology-based high frequency/low effort ways to check in with students about their emotional needs
- The importance of high-quality professional development and planning for staff members to effectively use technological tools

> *"I think wellness has been one of the things that has clearly come to the forefront for our students and staff. What I'm really interested in is continuing a wellness committee where what are some things that we can do to support wellness. I know the high school this week, for example, is doing spirit week virtual , not ideal, but again, it's an attempt. Doing those wellness things I think is something that's very, very important moving forward and doing that more often. In a typical school year, we'd have a week for staff recognition or classified or certificated or whatever, but I think doing something on a more consistent basis with wellness and caring, sharing examples. I think we've done a lot of building together and I think that's also been a benefit of the pandemic is realizing how much that we can get done and we can do when we do build together. Those are things that I think moving forward, I want to continue to focus on those wellness things that we can do all year long. We don't have to have "do it once a week out of the year." (Superintendent)*

Students work together on a community service project to make a tie-blanket.

AREAS OF STRENGTH IN DISTRICT OFFICE SUPPORT FOR CARING

The areas of strength and opportunities for growth identified by district leaders were quite diverse and varied. Some areas of strength included:

- Elevation of core values into practice
- Emphasizing the importance of personal/professional balance to staff
- Having the right people in the right position
- Advocating for students
- Social and Emotional Learning curricula and programming
- Creating multiple programs, schools, and pathways for students to be successful
- Incorporating whole child support into the school improvement process
- Creating a strong and reciprocal support system for adults
- Generating access to mental health services for students, families, and school staff
- Integrating a whole child focus into the district's Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

> *One of the things we do really well is that we do have a lot of innovative people who want to try different programs and they have ideas for how to support kids. From an upper-level administrator all the way down to building level, we're really good at supporting teachers' efforts. If they come to us with some ideas or what they would love to do, professional development they see, books they want to read. There's a lot of positive energy around giving people the all clear to try some things. That's a strength that we have is that we know that there's a need but there's not a need to always be a top-down, 'Here's what you're doing.' We like the homegrown ideas that come into place." (Student Services Director)*

Hula hoops and pool noodles make social distancing more fun.

AREAS FOR GROWTH IN DISTRICT OFFICE SUPPORT FOR CARING

District leaders identified the following opportunity for growth:

- Developing interpersonal relationships in a large system
- Consistent follow-up and outreach in staff communications
- Transparency in decision-making processes
- Achieving longevity and consistency in district systems and practices
- Developing interventions for social and emotional learning on par with academic interventions
- Having better opportunities for alternative schools and alternative pathways
- Adopting an integrated systems approach to problem solving
- Recognizing and responding to growing diversity within the district
- Navigating community concerns and resistance regarding equity programming
- Having stronger Tier 3 mental health supports during transitions from middle school to high school
- Consistent family outreach for persistently uncommunicative families

> *What we're not doing well, I think, is we don't have really good connections and partnerships for mental health support. We're missing something with at-risk kids as they transition into high school. We're losing those kids; we're missing how to connect with them and keep them cared for. That is some big work that needs to happen for us, not losing these kids that disappear on us, and we haven't been able to get them into a GED program. That is something we have to work on in order to reach all kids. That's why our graduation rate is what it is, is because we have a missing place there with those most at risk tier 3 mental health involved, law enforcement involved, gang-involved kids. Really, I would say, it starts with eighth and the transition to ninth is where we're losing that."*
> *(Assistant Superintendent)*

District leaders made clear that caring about students meant caring about their future plans and options.

STREET LEVEL BUREAUCRACY & IMPLICATIONS
FOR CARING PRACTICE

Those who study "street level bureaucrats" have noticed that they are most responsible for implementing new policy and practice "on the ground" (Lipsky, 1980). At the same time, because of the sheer volume of work they experience, they often do their best to generate routines and fit new demands into existing work. Depending on how this is done, this can lead for intended changes and improvement to not actually alter day-to-day practice. Because many workers in education are street level bureaucrats, this connects to caring schooling as well.

Reflective Questions:
- When changing a system (e.g., MTSS, PBIS), what aspects of the change mean altering existing routines or procedures? What aspects of the change necessitate a different routine altogether?
- What are the "bottom line" expectations for how changes will affect daily work habits? What, in turn, is more open to flexibility based on context?
- Is there widespread understanding about how systems, or changes to systems, are linked to a desired result? Or is there ambiguity about these links?
- When people are asked to behave in ways that run counter to what they have been asked to do in the past, do they understand the outcome this change is intended to produce?

Activity: Systems supporting kids

One popular activity in schools involves going through the student body and ensuring that every student has a close, caring, and supportive relationship with at least one adult. Although relationships are undoubtedly the bedrock of students' school experiences, students are also borne upon a web of policies, practices, procedures, and activities that impact their daily lives in schools.

This activity involves a student-level audit not of relationships, but of systems that students are involved in related to care and support in school. Some such systems will be universal (e.g., MTSS Tier 1 supports, PBIS, SEL daily curricula) while others are likely to be more specialized (e.g., participation on the soccer team, mental health supports). Once the list is complete, it is important to examine how this constellation of systems is shaping the student experience: does it seem like something might be missing? Is there too much emphasis on behavior modification and not enough on general support or academic intervention?

Although it is possible (albeit time consuming) to do this with every student, it will likely be easier to do so with smaller groups of 3-4 students at a time. Over time, these examinations will give a better picture of how systems, policies, and practices are interrelated and who is being effectively supported vs. who might benefit from additional help. This approach also helps clarify what is happening "on the ground" in daily school life, and how routines may be changed (or new routines introduced) to better achieve desired ends. For example, many district leaders spoke about students who are on the border of Tier 1 and Tier 2 in terms of Academic or Behavioral supports being a concern. This system-level examination may help to better clarify what is happening with those students and achieve more consistent understandings about what is needed.

INSTITUTIONALISM AND & IMPLICATIONS
FOR CARING PRACTICE

Scholars of institutions observe that people want their actions to appear legitimate, and this can often lead them to act in ways that are seen as "appropriate" even if these actions are not likely to lead to the desired result (Scott, 2008). For example, the school year for most schools and universities in the United States runs from fall to spring, with summers off, even though our economy is no longer agrarian, and many other countries have lengthened their school years (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2018). When schools and districts introduce new initiatives or a new focus (e.g., a focus on care and social/emotional support), institutional pressures can sometimes stand in the way.

Reflective Questions:
- In what ways is our work around care and support aligned with what other schools and districts are doing? In what ways are we doing things according to our unique needs and context?
- When we are asked to change our actions (e.g., by implementing an SEL curriculum) to what extent do we also rethink our purposes?

Activity #1: Levers vs. Expectations
This activity requires both honesty and courage. Every day, we do many activities: some which we clearly believe will advance our goals, and others that we do because we are required by law, or expected to do by our supervisors, or simply because we have always done them without questioning whether they move us forward.

Along with your team (whether other teachers or administrators) create a list of the activities you use to advance care and support for students. These should include daily habits and interactions, but also programs or systems you implement. Then, examine your list to determine which activities you believe are the best tools you use to care for students, and which you are less committed to. If possible, for activities you are less committed to try to identify why you do them (i.e., are they required by law? Are they expected of you by your boss? Have you been doing them for 15 years?).

The purpose of this activity is not to eliminate activities that you or your team are less committed to (though you may choose to do that over time). Rather, it is to notice which activities seem more useful because of the outcomes they produce, and which might have other motivations.

Activity #2: Personal competencies for care
Caring is a natural human way of being in relation, and most people who enter education do so in part because of a drive to care for others (Noddings, 2013). Caring is also not a one-size fits all phenomenon. Most people learn what it means to care based on the way that they themselves are cared for. For young people, and even for adults, this can mean that when someone tries to demonstrate caring in a way that is incongruent with care they've experienced in the past, they may not recognize it as care or even find it alienating (Tronto, 2010; Valenzuela, 2005).

That is why, even though the intention to care is natural, caring demands that we see caring not through our own eyes, but through eyes of those we intend to care for. A first step in building these skills is by reflecting on our caring relationships growing up: with parents, with teachers, and with our peers. How did you know who cared about you and how have you incorporated that into your own efforts to care for others? Then, share these experiences with adult peers: notice similarities, but also be on the lookout for differences. Finally, reflect on your relational approach. How might different care experiences and expectations about support shape interactions?

THEORIES OF ACTION & IMPLICATIONS
FOR CARING PRACTICE

In an ideal world, the way we say that we see problems and challenges and our actions to solve those problems would be perfectly aligned. In practice though, we often say that we see the world one way, but our actions suggest another set of beliefs (Argyris, 1976). This can lead to two challenges. First, if our underlying beliefs about a situation are wrong, we can get trapped in a cycle of trying to fix a problem, failing, trying something else, and failing again without ever examining our beliefs. Second, if we cannot see how our actions are not well connected to how we say we see a situation, it is hard to honestly reexamine our underlying valued and beliefs. Thoughtfully aligning beliefs and actions with intended outcomes is critical to systemic care and support.

Reflective Question:
• What exactly are the outcomes we hope to achieve with our systems of support and care? Besides the end goals, what are the proximal outcomes along the way?

Activity #1: Examining Intended Outcomes and Beliefs
Begin by answering the reflective question above. Following this, split into two groups. Have one group backwards map actions for care and support onto beliefs and values about care and support. Have the other group work the other way: begin by examining beliefs and values about care and support, and map these onto actions. Examine the similarities and differences between the two groups. Are beliefs and actions well aligned both ways?

Next, using available data, appraise your progress toward your intended outcomes. Examine both the end goal outcomes but also mile markers along the way. In areas where you feel growth is possible, explore two different questions. First, where might changing actions or practices be warranted to get your group closer to their goals? Second, based on what is happening, what underlying beliefs or assumptions may need to be reexamined or changed?

Activity #2: Relational Modelling and Adult Support
Care and support are multi-layered practices. The way others act serves as a model for how we will act in turn. The way that principals demonstrate care and support for teachers and staff is reflected in how teachers and staff care for students (Klein & Bremm, 2019).

Increasingly, social and emotional education involves activities related to social awareness and relationship skills. However, there is a real risk that these activities can be counterproductive if they become about process rather than about feeling. As Hoffman (2009) notes:

> However, the caring community, when translated into practice, becomes a discourse about activities and behaviors teachers get children to engage in, including classroom meetings, sharing circles, structured exercises such as role playing, collaborative group activities, and individual behaviors such as taking turns and sharing, following rules, and making good choices rather than a language of feelings or emotional connectedness. What is essentially happening is that when it comes to describing and recommending actual practices of classroom management, the language of caring ideals often devolves to a discourse about control, rules, contracts, choices, activities, and organizational structures. In effect, substance is replaced by structure; feeling is replaced by form. Most tellingly, caring and community are conceptualized as things teachers teach children to do by getting them to behave in appropriate ways (p. 545).

One essential solution to this challenge is ensuring that adult relationships in the school and in the district are characterized by emotional support and connectedness. Importantly, this does not necessarily imply lengthy conversations about feelings. It does imply, however, a need to discuss what sort of affective commitments members of a school can make to each other, and how leaders will serve as models of these commitments (Ancess, 2003).

IMPROVEMENT SCIENCE & IMPLICATIONS
FOR CARING PRACTICE

The insight of improvement scientists is that when we try to improve, we have to have a well-defined problem and examine that problem from the perspective of "users." Problems are not monolithic and solvable by improving average outcomes; rather, the work of solving problems involves a textured understanding of variance within the problem. Of course, this also implies that we can measure where we are and examine progress along the way (Bryk, 2021).

One challenge with reforms and policy changes that are intended to improve the capacity of schools to support and care for students is that the "problem" these reforms are intended to solve is somewhat fuzzy (especially when compared with, for example, academic outcomes). We have increasing evidence about the way that trauma impacts students, and evidence that the proportion of students with mental health challenges is increasing. There is also an increasing recognition that social and emotional knowledge is highly important to students' overall wellbeing. And, there is a sense that all of this is connected to students' academic outcomes. However, the precise way that all of these challenges fit together is often left to schools and districts to decide. Developing a working theory of the "macro problem" is essential because it shapes our sense of what is and isn't important, but improvement science suggests that it is possible to tackle "micro problems" along the way.

Reflective Questions

- What is our "working theory" for how our efforts to care for and support students fit into our larger mission?
- In addition to the overarching "working theory," what are the most important intermediate outcomes along the way?
- What can we measure about these intermediate outcomes? In which cases can we measure outcomes, and in which cases can we only measure processes?
- What can we observe about variance within these intermediate outcomes?

Activity: What do we measure and how does it vary?

This activity is directly tied to the reflective questions above. Frequently, our ability to measure challenges and outcomes related to care and support is less well developed than our ability to measure academic outcomes. However, if we cannot measure outcomes (i.e., the proportion of students who feel a strong sense of belonging in school) directly, we can often track processes (i.e., students' responses on an advisory check in).

Judiciously choosing which practices to track may give us a great deal of insight into how a problem varies amongst student subgroups. For this activity, define a problem or challenge you hope to address, even if it is not easily measured. Then, figure out the most easily tracked processes related to this problem. Systematically track the process over a period of time- the time will depend on the problem, but three weeks is often a good rule of thumb. Finally, engage in one or more Plan, Do, Study, Act cycles to try to improve outcomes (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & Lemahieu, 2015; Bryk, 2021 for more detail).

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this project was to understand how district central offices strive to support schools in their efforts to care for students. The activities described on the previous pages are necessarily general, because this project demonstrated that districts are engaging in this work in quite different ways, but also provide easily adaptable organizational approaches to grappling with these challenges. One finding that clearly emerged from this project is that central office personnel are hard at work, and engaging with the challenge of building caring and equitable school communities every day, and doing so in ways that are creative and innovative.

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