

Beyond the Policy Memo: Designing to Strengthen the Practice of District Central Office
Leadership for Instructional Improvement at Scale

Meredith I. Honig

University of Washington

Acknowledgements:

Thanks to Nitya Venkateswaran for research assistance related to the writing of this chapter and the editors for encouraging me to write it and their leadership in the field.

Executive Summary

School district central offices face unprecedented demands to lead for district-wide teaching and learning improvement. These demands require central office staff to engage in work that is counter-normative for both central offices as institutions and for central office administrators as professionals. Such demands seem to far outstrip districts' capacity, suggesting the importance of focusing new attention on central office capacity building. But capacity to do what? Research studies on central office leadership practice are few and far between and mostly focuses on negative cases—examples of central office leadership practice that does not advance school improvement rather than central office practice that contributes positively to school-level results. To improve the performance of central offices, leaders in those settings need both new models of district central office leaders' practice and support to build their capacity to adopt and advance them.

In this chapter, I propose *design-based leadership research* (DBLR) as a means to address this dual challenge of the need for better models of central office practice and supports for their implementation. Like other design studies, design-based leadership research starts with the development of designs that reflect the latest knowledge about how practitioners' work matters for improved student results. Unlike much of design-based research in education, design-based leadership research calls for the development of designs not of classroom interventions or teaching practice but of leadership practice, especially at the central office level. This focus on designing for leaders as the central actors, rather than deriving implications for leaders from work in schools and elsewhere, promises to significantly improve the relevance of empirically-based guides available for central office work. Researchers then work alongside central office

leaders to use the designs to develop approaches to their own practice that reflect the designs and also fit their settings. Participants study the process to feed new knowledge into the partnership sites and the field. Thus DBLR is essentially oriented toward the ongoing adaptation of work practices important in complex central office work environments like school district central offices.

Conducting DBLR requires researchers and leaders to address several issues that are related both to design research and to central office and other leadership practice. For one, as in any research or practice context, participants must determine whether this mode of inquiry/intervention is appropriate to their investigation. Two, some central office staff struggle with holding their own practice center stage; those interested in conducting DBLR should plan to actively help their central office partners understand the importance of designing for their own practice as a main target of the work. Third, as with other design studies, DBLR involves practitioners adapting research-based ideas to their own practice settings. Such adaptations can be essential to replicating successes with reform ideas. But those involved with DBLR must meaningfully grapple with when an adaptation is true to the research and when it falls outside those boundaries and represents what some design researchers have called “lethal mutations.”

Design-based research of any kind requires close relationships between researchers and practitioners over time. Since design work unfolds over time, leaders should look for design partners who can make long-standing commitments to their system and to working with them side-by-side in the intensive ways DBLR requires. Those who support the development of educational researchers through training and research grants might significantly advance the field of DBLR by investing in a next-generation of researchers who can work ably between research and practice communities.