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Reform On and From the Inside: Bureaucratic Mobilization in School District Central Offices

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Abstract:

School district central offices wield enormous power over a superintendent's reform agenda. The bureaucrats in these offices are simultaneously responsible for the execution of a superintendent's district-wide vision and exercise a wide degree of autonomy. Yet, in spite of their tremendous influence over the outcome of important school reform efforts, central offices remain an understudied part of the literature on superintendent leadership or bureaucracy. This paper attempts to build understanding of the dynamic between new, reform-minded superintendents and their central offices through a case study that uniquely centers the voices of school district bureaucrats. The case study illuminates three critically important lessons about central offices. First, the organization of a central office is meaningful. Structure guides how the bureaucrats in central offices think about their work and, therefore, changes to organizational structure can themselves carry meaning. Second, strong-armed reform tactics do not, at least in the short term, appear effective at building internal buy-in. Third reforms can be understood very differently by new superintendents and the staff that have spent their careers in these complex bureaucracies. Describing school district central offices as they currently exist, as this capstone sets out to do, is the first step in understanding these complicated and critically important institutions of American public education.

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I. Introduction

A superintendent of a large system cannot personally supervise every principal, directly ensure every school bus runs on time, or write the curriculum for every class. Instead, superintendents hire staff who— rather than directly serving children— take on specialized administrative responsibilities necessary for the daily functioning of schools. Because central offices oversee the operational functions of a school district across instruction, operations, finance, and human resources, any district-wide reform ultimately must be executed by the staff in these bureaucracies. Given their power as instruments of district-wide change, school district central offices are the most important understudied part of American education.

In medium and large school districts, newly-appointed superintendents inherit central employees who were hired, trained, and spent their careers under different leaders. Any superintendent's plans are ultimately in the hands of this personnel. After all, a district-wide reform vision for a school system matters little if the staff who are responsible for district-wide policy implementation do not carry it out. But, as bureaucracy researchers suggest, the central office actors that execute a superintendent's vision have their own motivations that may not necessarily align with those of the new superintendent.¹ Whether compelled by ideological differences, tradition, lack of skill, or sloth, the discretion of central office bureaucrats gives them power to decide the fate of a superintendent's agenda. To effectively and quickly implement their vision, a reform-minded superintendent has to rapidly steer or reshape their inherited bureaucracy and compel those who work in it to do their part to carry out the new educational program.

¹ Jennifer Nou, "Bureaucratic Resistance from Below," *Yale Journal on Regulation*, November 16, 2016, <https://www.yalejreg.com/nc/bureaucratic-resistance-from-below-by-jennifer-nou/>.

The stakes of effective bureaucratic mobilization in school districts are high. Many of today's most pressing crises in education are rooted in the failure of education leaders, over successive generations, to affect necessary and disruptive change that is executed through central offices. Socioeconomic and racial achievement gaps persist alongside widely publicized and proven district-level strategies for closing them.² In spite of their widely studied and understood negative consequences for student achievement, rates of racial and socioeconomic segregation are increasing.³ All the while, school system funding has increased by at least 280% since 1960, while academic achievement has stagnated.⁴ The decision to respond to these specific macro-level crises is in the hands of superintendents. Alongside well-studied constraints such as budget limitations and local politics, what those invested in change often run up against are bureaucratic systems that struggle to quickly implement rapid reform.

The urgent problems facing American schools are mounting simultaneously with unprecedented turnover of superintendents across the country, a problem that has only been exacerbated by the pandemic.⁵ As new superintendents are sworn in over the coming months and years, they will inherit crises borne of previous inaction and central office bureaucracies that can either be instrumental or prohibitive in addressing them. Superintendents with a sense of urgency

² Karen Chenoweth and Kati Haycock, *"It's Being Done": Academic Success in Unexpected Schools*, illustrated edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2007).

³ Richard Rothstein, "FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS, SEGREGATION THEN, SEGREGATION SINCE: Education and the Unfinished March" (Economic Policy Institute, August 27, 2013), <https://files.epi.org/2013/Unfinished-March-School-Segregation.pdf>.

⁴ Corey DeAngelis, "Inflation-Adjusted K-12 Education Spending Per Student Has Increased By 280 Percent Since 1960," Reason Foundation, June 15, 2020, <https://reason.org/commentary/inflation-adjusted-k-12-education-spending-per-student-has-increased-by-280-percent-since-1960/>.

⁵ Nik Streng, "Idaho Experiencing 'Unprecedented' Superintendent Turnover," *Idaho Education News* (blog), May 1, 2021, <https://www.idahoednews.org/news/idaho-experiencing-unprecedented-superintendent-turnover/>; Joe Heim and Valerie Strauss, "As Difficult School Year Ends, School Superintendents Are Opting Out," *Washington Post*, June 20, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/superintendents-quit-pandemic-school-year/2021/06/19/e9e02594-cfaa-11eb-8014-2f3926ca24d9_story.html.

about addressing today's educational challenges need more than a vision— they need to understand the bureaucratic instruments that are responsible for carrying out their initiatives.

Yet, despite its critical importance for education reform efforts, the central office is a severely understudied part of the scholarship on bureaucracy, the superintendency, or school systems. As I lay out in my literature review, the overwhelming majority of bureaucratic research is focused on the federal level. Most literature on superintendents does not deal in specifics with the central office staff who the superintendent oversees. And of the existing scholarship on central offices, many scholars either dismiss central offices or propose new bureaucratic models for these offices without fully taking account of how they presently operate. There are a multitude of factors at play in the success of a superintendent's term, including the school board, outside political control, budget constraints, and the broader political mood of the community. These variables are each significant. However, because they have already been well-studied and documented by a number of scholars, this capstone will focus squarely on where the literature on effective superintendent leadership has not adequately explored: the role of the school district central office.

This capstone seeks to build understanding of the dynamic between new, reform-minded superintendents and the central offices they inherit through a case study describing how one superintendent in a large school district tangled with his central office in pursuit of reform. Using hundreds of pages of internal documents, archived local news articles, other scholarship, and interviews with five school system actors, this case study aims to specifically detail how a real central office responds to rapid changes. Unlike many other case studies of superintendent leadership, this case study will directly share the perspectives of central office workers. In laying out how the superintendent sought to reform the central office across the dimensions of culture,

structure, and personnel, I draw out three important lessons for understanding central offices. First, the organization of a central office is, in itself, meaningful. Structure guides how bureaucrats in the central office think about their work and, therefore, changes to the organizational structure can themselves carry meaning. Second, strong-armed reform tactics do not, at least in the short term, appear effective at building internal buy-in. Third, reforms can be perceived very differently by the architect of the reforms and the rank and file central office staff the changes directly affect. Describing school district central offices as they currently exist, as this capstone sets out to do, is the first step in understanding these complicated and critically important institutions of American public education.

Some may question the normative value of top-down disruptive reform in school systems. It is certainly true that there have been many notable “disruptive” education leaders who, upon assuming power, promptly pursued agendas arguably harmful to public education. But disruption, which involves the hurried implementation of change coupled with a willingness to disregard traditional structures and timelines, is inherently detrimental only to the status quo. Disruption can serve any ideological cause. For example, truly pursuing equity in American education may inherently demand disruption. Implementing social justice-minded policies in school districts requires confronting centuries of ossified structures of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and classism. But just as well, in many districts, implementing a radically reactionary education agenda that emphasizes nationalism and bars discussion of race would similarly cause trouble and spark some degree of backlash. An education leader genuinely and quickly attempting to change entrenched systems is inherently disruptive to the existing state of affairs built on them. This paper will refrain from ultimately making any normative assessments of disruption or concluding whether rapid reform or disruption is ultimately “good” or “bad” for

school districts. It only aims to observe, identify, and explain the collision between reform-minded education leaders and the bureaucracies they inherit.

II. Literature Review

This capstone seeks to put the literatures of political bureaucracy, superintendent leadership, and school district central offices in conversation with each other. While the lessons of each field are rarely applied to one another, they are— theoretically and in practice— deeply connected. In order for a superintendent to effectively lead their district, they must effectively mobilize the central office, which is a bureaucratic entity. The literature on bureaucracy and, most relevantly for this capstone, bureaucratic resistance, is rich, though mostly focused on the federal level. Academic research on superintendent leadership is a burgeoning field of study, though typically ignores or over-generalizes the role and perspective of central office staff. And, while there is some study on potential new models of school district central offices, there is disappointingly little research on their existing nature or characteristics. To situate this capstone in a broader academic discussion, I will survey each of the three fields and identify where this capstone seeks to contribute.

A. Bureaucracy and Bureaucratic Resistance

To understand school district central offices, we must first understand bureaucracy generally. Since public administration was first established as an academic field, scholars have gradually evolved from idealizing bureaucracies as monolithic apolitical instruments to recognizing bureaucracies as made up of many individual decision-makers with their own preferences.

President Woodrow Wilson is generally considered the father of public administration as an area of study.⁶ In his writings on bureaucracy, Wilson insisted that public agencies should be “removed from the hurry and strife of politics” and are “a part of political life only as machinery is part of the manufactured product.”⁷ Wilson strongly believed that political debate over laws should be strictly separated from the state’s actual implementation of the laws. Around the same time in Germany, political economist Max Weber developed a similar politics-bureaucracy dichotomy.⁸ Anxious about political meddling in the operations of the burgeoning welfare state in Europe, Weber argued for a “rational public administration” that was governed by “written rules, an impersonal order, and a clear division of labor.”⁹

As the federal bureaucracy expanded in the United States, fear over the separation of politics and bureaucracy sparked debates on how best to preserve democratic control over government agencies. On one side of these debates, political scientist Carl Friedrich argued that organizational rules within bureaucracies were sufficient to ensure agencies obeyed the government’s democratically decided directives.¹⁰ Political scientist Herman Finer disagreed, arguing that further external legislative controls were necessary. Finer contended that, in absence of these external controls, “sooner or later there is an abuse of power” by bureaucracies, whether by not following the state’s charge, subverting the state’s charge, or going beyond the state’s charge.¹¹

⁶ Francis Fukuyama, “The Decline of American Public Administration,” The Volcker Alliance, August 14, 2018, <https://www.volckeralliance.org/blog/2018/aug/decline-american-public-administration>.

⁷ Wilson, 2019–2210.

⁸ Fritz Sager and Christian Rosser, “Weber, Wilson, and Hegel: Theories of Modern Bureaucracy,” *Public Administration Review* 69, no. 6 (2009): 1136–47, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2009.02071.x>.

⁹ Sager and Rosser, 1137; John Brehm, *Working, Shirking, and Sabotage*, 6, accessed November 15, 2021, https://www.press.umich.edu/23217/working_shirking_and_sabotage.

¹⁰ Debra W. Stewart, “Professionalism Vs. Democracy: Friedrich vs. Finer Revisited,” *Public Administration Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (1985): 13–25.

¹¹ Herman Finer, “Administrative Responsibility in Democratic Government,” *Public Administration Review* 1, no. 4 (1941): 337, <https://doi.org/10.2307/972907>.

In the mid-1900s, scholarly discussion of bureaucracy shifted focus from studying bureaucracies as monolithic entities and began to more thoughtfully study the individual actors within federal bureaucracies and their preferences. The concept of a strict politics-bureaucracy dichotomy lost traction, with scholars such as Norton Long asserting that “attempts to solve administrative problems in isolation from the structure of power and purpose in the polity are bound to prove illusory.”¹² The question of what shapes bureaucratic preferences emerged as a central controversy of academic debate on bureaucracy. Rational choice theorists like Anthony Downs argued that “like all other agents in society, [bureaucratic officials] are motivated by their own self interests.”¹³ A competing school of thought identified the personal moral holdings of individual bureaucrats as a driving motivator. Political scientist John Dilulio Jr., for example, argued that “even in the bowels of government agencies, there is more self-sacrifice, and less self-interest, than rational choice theory allows.”¹⁴

The acceptance of individual bureaucratic preferences was significant for the study of bureaucracy. Researchers began to theorize that the individual motivations of bureaucrats—whether driven by virtue or self-interest— “might lead them to significantly alter their behavior from what their superiors in the bureaucratic hierarchy might prefer them to do.”¹⁵ Several researchers have sought to describe what happens when the preferences of bureaucrats differ from the directives of their bosses or the broader government. One framework developed by Albert Hirschman, and subsequently applied to two federal agencies under Reagan by Marissa Martino Goden, identifies means of resistance available to bureaucrats as “exit, voice, loyalty,

¹² Norton E. Long, “Power and Administration,” *Public Administration Review* 9, no. 4 (1949): 226, <https://doi.org/10.2307/972337>.

¹³ Anthony Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy*, 1st edition (Little, Brown and Company, 1967).

¹⁴ John D. Dilulio, “Principled Agents: The Cultural Bases of Behavior in a Federal Government Bureaucracy,” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory: J-PART* 4, no. 3 (1994): 316.

¹⁵ Brehm, *Working, Shirking, and Sabotage*, 9.

and neglect.”¹⁶ Recently, University of Chicago professor Jennifer Nou has written extensively about the mechanisms bureaucrats use to “resist from below,” including slowdowns, leaking to the press, enlisting external allies, and resigning.¹⁷

The emphasis of most research on American bureaucracy is on the triangular relationship between federal agencies, Congress, and the president. Local agencies, and especially the school district central office, have received far less attention in bureaucratic research. However, the insufficiency of early conceptualizations of bureaucracy as singular, apolitical institutions carries important lessons for understanding school district central offices. Just as bureaucrats in other parts of government, central office employees have their own preferences, incentives, and motivations. School system bureaucracies should not be taken as static, impersonal instruments of their leader. This capstone will seek to take the lessons outlined from the growing academic understanding of bureaucratic discretion and adapt them to the setting of school district central offices during periods of reform.

B. The Superintendency and its Limits

The next step in understanding the central office is examining its boss: the superintendent. Much of the research on superintendent leadership mentions central offices, but little scholarship focuses specifically on how superintendents structure or change the offices they inherit.

Nearly all academic analyses of the superintendency coverages on two realities: the job is not well understood and very complicated. In their 1981 assessment of superintendents, Nancy

¹⁶ Marissa Martino Golden, *What Motivates Bureaucrats?: Politics and Administration During the Reagan Years* (Columbia University Press, 2000), 152.

¹⁷ Nou, “Bureaucratic Resistance from Below.”

Pitner and Rodney Ogawa argue that “in spite of the sizable literature surrounding the superintendency, much remains to be uncovered about its basic nature,” including “even such basic questions as: What is it that superintendents do and how do they think and feel about their work?”¹⁸ In their 2002 book, *Case Studies of the Superintendency*, Paula M. Short and Jay Paredes Scribner contend that “the role of the school superintendent has evolved into one of the most complex leadership positions seen today,” even as other scholars have pointed out that “we know less about school superintendents than about any other set of chief executives in the nation.”¹⁹

Still, the direction of the superintendent plays an undeniably important role in school districts. Proven interventions for addressing today’s crises in education clearly run through superintendents’ offices and a growing body of empirical data suggests that superintendent leadership can have a direct impact on their students’ education.²⁰ One study of 1,210 school districts led by Timothy J. Waters and Robert J. Marzano in 2006 found that “when district leaders effectively address specific responsibilities, they can have a profound, positive impact on student achievement in their districts.”²¹ This result was corroborated in 2010 by a University of Minnesota report that found superintendent leadership can have empirically proven “strong,

¹⁸ Nancy J. Pitner and Rodney T. Ogawa, “Organizational Leadership: The Case of the School Superintendent,” *Educational Administration Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (May 1, 1981): 45, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X8101700204>.

¹⁹ Paula M. Short and Jay Paredes Scribner, *Case Studies of the Superintendency* (R&L Education, 2002); *JOURNAL OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP, Jsl Vol 13-N3* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

²⁰ Elizabeth Diaz, “Howard School Superintendent Brave in Tackling de Facto Segregation,” *baltimoresun.com*, September 12, 2019, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/readers-respond/bs-ed-rr-howard-county-schools-superintendent-brave-letter-20190912-ocyz6xqhsbfz5cgprsd54xf74q-story.html>; Erin M. Fahle et al., “Racial Segregation and School Poverty in the United States, 1999–2016,” *Race and Social Problems* 12, no. 1 (March 1, 2020): 42–56, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-019-09277-w>; Howell Wright, *The Role of the Superintendent in Closing the Achievement Gap in Diverse Small School Districts*, ProQuest LLC (ProQuest LLC, 2009).

²¹ J. Timothy Waters and Robert J. Marzano, “The Primacy of Superintendent Leadership,” *School Administrator* 64, no. 3 (March 2007): 10.

positive, although indirect, effects on students on student learning.”²² Of course, any positive change thought up by a superintendent ultimately must be executed through the central office.

Many accounts of the superintendency begin by defining the core structural limitation of the position: superintendents are reliant on other actors to execute their will. In their report for the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), Paul Hill and Ashley Jochim apply a three-part framework of presidential power to the superintendency to outline this constraint. First, a superintendent cannot implement any change by themselves and, at best, can offer to take specific actions and bargain. Second, a superintendent’s power to bargain is a product of their professional reputation. Third, every action a superintendent takes affects their ability to make future actions.²³

Because of the superintendent’s reliance on others, many researchers studying the role have come to view a superintendent’s responsibilities as “exquisitely political.”²⁴ Much of the scholarship exploring this political role focuses on the superintendent’s relationship with external actors, including bargaining for support with local politicians, business leaders, higher education, state officials, and parents.²⁵ Other research has explored the dynamics between superintendents and internal school-based actors, such as principals.²⁶ Several studies, however, have also

²² Kyla Wahlstrom et al., “Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning: Executive Summary of Research Findings,” Report (The Wallace Foundation, 2010), <http://conservancy.umn.edu/handle/11299/140884>.

²³ Paul Hill and Ashley Jochim, *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness*, Center on Reinventing Public Education (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2018), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED581436>.

²⁴ Kenneth Leithwood, *Effective School District Leadership: Transforming Politics into Education* (SUNY Press, 1995).

²⁵ Hill and Jochim, *Unlocking Potential*, 4.

²⁶ Sheryl Boris-Schacter, *The Changing Relationship between Principal and Superintendent: Shifting Roles in an Era of Educational Reform. New Directions for School Leadership, New Directions for School Leadership* (Jossey-Bass Inc, 1999); Robert Jay Roelle, “Better School Superintendents, More Effective Principals? A Study of the Relationship between Superintendent Leadership Practices and Principal Job Satisfaction,” *ETD Collection for Fordham University*, January 1, 2010, 1–172.

highlighted the critical role that superintendent-central office bureaucratic relationships play in the success of a superintendent's agenda. The "nominal subordinates of the superintendent" that work in central offices are noted in Hill and Jochim's study as not being required "to do something just because the superintendent says so."²⁷ The report briefly prescribes what a superintendent must do to get these central office actors to "act in unaccustomed ways" (i.e. rapidly implement reforms):

[Superintendents] must overcome skepticism by being specific about what they expect the central office to do and by putting themselves in a position to learn when things go right (and provide rewards in the form of praise) and when they don't (and intervene so everyone knows the superintendent is serious).²⁸

Former Dixbury, CT Superintendent John Antonucci's dissertation on superintendent leadership found "evidence that superintendents' success is largely predicated on their ability" to build relationships with the subordinates they inherit from the central office bureaucracy.²⁹ Indeed, Nancy Piner and Rodney Ogawa's survey of a handful of superintendents around the country supports the idea that most of a superintendent's job is working directly alongside their central office staff: the researchers found that 80 percent of a superintendent's time is spent in "direct interaction with people in unscheduled and scheduled meetings," spending half of this time with central office bureaucrats.³⁰

²⁷ Hill and Jochim, *Unlocking Potential*, 3.

²⁸ Hill and Jochim, 3.

²⁹ John J. Antonucci, "The Experience of School Superintendent Leadership in the 21st Century A Phenomenological Study" (Ed.D., United States -- Massachusetts, Northeastern University), 153, accessed October 4, 2021, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1039147056/abstract/EFB55A397A424790PQ/1>.

³⁰ Piner and Ogawa, "Organizational Leadership," 51, 52.

Another widely understood aspect of the superintendent's political role is communication— both to the school community and to the superintendent's central office employees. Former Superintendent Theodore Kowalski traces the growing importance of the superintendent's voice in education leadership in his paper "Evolution of the School Superintendent as Communicator."³¹ Kowalski observes that "experience arising from the current school reform movement demonstrates that relationship-enhancing communication rather than top-down dicta are necessary for advancing educational agendas."³² In his dissertation, Antonucci similarly found that "the ability to communicate effectively with internal and external stakeholders is a skill that stands out as important for success [such as] influencing school culture and productivity, leading change, gaining acceptance of a message, and building relationships within the community."³³

The superintendency is complicated by the tendency for rapid turnover, which carries implications for how a superintendents' staff thinks about their leadership. In a paper by Jason Grissom and Stephanie Andersen, the wealth of a district, school board dissatisfaction, and whether a superintendent is "homegrown" are found to be important factors correlating with superintendent turnover.³⁴ A 2002 competing paper by Gerald Natkin et. al titled "Myth of the Revolving-Door Superintendency" disputes any modern increase in superintendent turnover rates or superintendent turnover's connection to the size or type of school districts.³⁵ Still, Grissom and Anderson point out that, regardless of actual quantitative magnitude, the widespread

³¹ Theodore J. Kowalski, "Evolution of the School Superintendent as Communicator," *Communication Education* 54, no. 2 (April 1, 2005): 101–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520500213322>.

³² Kowalski.

³³ Antonucci, "The Experience of School Superintendent Leadership in the 21st Century A Phenomenological Study," 153.

³⁴ Jason A. Grissom and Stephanie Andersen, "Why Superintendents Turn Over," *American Educational Research Journal* 49, no. 6 (December 1, 2012): 1174, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831212462622>.

³⁵ Gerald Natkin et al., "Myth of the Revolving-Door Superintendency," *School Administrator* 59, no. 5 (2002): 28–31.

perception of rapid superintendent turnover itself may end up leading to decreased bureaucratic responsiveness as those in central offices “adopt a ‘this too shall pass’ approach to superintendents’ priorities and directives.”³⁶

However, even with widespread academic recognition of the importance of the superintendent’s political role, the CRPE report still points out that “there’s relatively little [literature] on how superintendents can persuade people whom they can’t control but on whom their success depends.”³⁷ As the previous section on bureaucracy laid out, school district central offices are not monoliths and the discretion of individual bureaucrats precludes direct control of the superintendent. In other words, while it is widely acknowledged that an effective superintendent must mobilize actors in a school district, there is far less clarity on how superintendents do so in regards to the central office workers they directly oversee.

C. School District Central Offices

For a large part of early American education history, school district central offices were uncommon and unnecessary. In early America, most schools were independent one-room schoolhouses.³⁸ These disconnected schools were, in effect, their own school districts and had no need for any larger organization to oversee them. However, as laid out by historian Michael Katz, the 19th century in America was defined by debates over the “inappropriateness of traditional organizational arrangements” and attempts to “find a suitable fit between the form and

³⁶ Grissom and Andersen, “Why Superintendents Turn Over,” 1147.

³⁷ Hill and Jochim, *Unlocking Potential*, 4.

³⁸ Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860*, 1st edition (Hill and Wang, 2011).

context of social life.”³⁹ The shape and nature of public schooling featured prominently in this national institution-building, with a range of public debates over how schools should operate. Katz identified four popularly discussed models for the organization of schooling: the wealthy educating the “unchurched poor,” the expansion of single-school districts, schools run by volunteers, and “incipient bureaucracy,” which stressed centralization, supervision and professionalization.⁴⁰ This last model ultimately prevailed and gradually came to be accepted as the standard model of American education. In 1865, the Connecticut state superintendent of schools declared that “immediate union of all the districts” was the “first great step” in American public school reform.⁴¹

The early 20th century marked the beginning of the large city-centered school district and the bureaucracy that grew to support it. In 1916, dean of the Stanford University School of Education Ellwood Cubberley published his extremely influential book *“Public School Administration.”* Cubberley was a prominent thinker of the Progressive Era movement, which held up expertise as a value that could “simultaneously abolish civic corruption, displace ward boards, and professionalize all aspects of public life.”⁴² Consequently, Cubberley argued that creating school district bureaucracies was the key to successful public schooling. He wrote that “nearly all of the important progress which has been made in education in America in the past quarter century has been made in our cities,” which he viewed as having “perfected their administrative organization and developed an administrative machinery capable of handling

³⁹ David A. Gamson and Emily M. Hodge, “Education Research and the Shifting Landscape of the American School District, 1816 to 2016,” *Review of Research in Education* 40, no. 1 (March 1, 2016): 224, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X16670323>.

⁴⁰ Gamson and Hodge, 225.

⁴¹ Gamson and Hodge, 225.

⁴² Gamson and Hodge, 229.

educational business on a large scale.”⁴³ As part of his idealized school district structure, Cubberly described a superintendent’s “central office,” where basic district-wide administrative tasks were completed.⁴⁴ Cubberley’s vision was influential and school district central offices began taking more concrete shape across the country. In many districts, the subsequent inclusion of “education departments” in central offices made them more than just clerical units but involved in the service of instruction.⁴⁵

In the latter half of the 20th century, a wave of school district consolidation spread across the country, spurred both by Supreme Court desegregation mandates and state legislation. These newly unified systems of previously small, fragmented school districts now needed stronger central offices to oversee district-wide administrative coordination. By the end of the 20th century, central offices were an extremely common feature of American public schools.

The organizational particulars of central offices vary across jurisdictions. Central office structure is shaped by the size of the district, history of the system, and agenda of the current superintendent. However, there are meaningful common structural themes across offices, particularly among offices of similar jurisdictional contexts.

The size of a school system matters significantly for its central office organizational shape, which can range from entirely flat to steeply conical. The degree of hierarchy and specialization within the central office follows from its shape. Central offices of smaller school districts tend to be structurally flatter, with a low degree of hierarchy and specialization. The flat

⁴³ Ellwood P. Cubberley, *Public School Administration* (Houghton Mifflin, 1929), 95; Ellwood Cubberley, “State and County School Administration: Changes in Practices and Principles of Action during the Past Quarter of a Century,” *School Board Journal* 53, no. 3 (1916): 10, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015025951347&view=1up&seq=1&skin=2021>.

⁴⁴ Cubberley, *Public School Administration*, 132, 166.

⁴⁵ Cubberley, “State and County School Administration: Changes in Practices and Principles of Action during the Past Quarter of a Century,” 235.

shape of these school districts is both a consequence of practicality and a limitation of size. Smaller school systems serve fewer students in fewer schools, requiring less administrative oversight. With less of a need for district-wide coordination, these central offices hire fewer employees. Instead of entire departments overseeing district responsibilities like school technology or school lunches, a small school central office may just assign those duties to one employee. As a consequence, layers upon layers of hierarchy are not possible; there is simply not enough staff for complex middle-management structures. Similarly, staff cannot specialize within fields of district-wide organization. As an illustration: instead of having one central office staff member in charge of school computer hardware, one staff central office staff member in charge of school computer software, and one central office staff member in charge of smart boards, a small, flat central office would have just one employee in charge of the district's technology broadly.

Compared to the scholarship on public administration and on superintendents, little has been written about the actual people working in school district central offices: their backgrounds, motivations, and understanding of their role in education reform. Before the 1990s, most scholarship on education either ignored or villainized school district central offices. As a 1996 article titled "School Districts Matter" noted, "local school districts do not figure prominently in contemporary school reform efforts."⁴⁶ When school district central offices were invoked, it was generally in an off-handed and negative way.⁴⁷ Some case studies of school districts discuss central offices in this light, such as Dale Ruskaoff's account of Newark public schools, which

⁴⁶ James P. Spillane, "School Districts Matter: Local Educational Authorities and State Instructional Policy," *Educational Policy* 10, no. 1 (March 1, 1996): 63–87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904896010001004>.

⁴⁷ John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 1990).

argues that Newark’s central office was used more for local job creation than directly supporting schools.⁴⁸

In recent years, there has been a growing focus on the potential for transformed school district central offices refocused on facilitating instruction. A substantive body of research has studied the importance of central office employees working within schools to improve teaching and learning.⁴⁹ Meredith Honig has led much of the recent research on instruction-centered central offices, focusing on how school district central offices should become “learning organizations.”⁵⁰ Still, most discussions of central offices tend not to substantively address 1.) central offices’ structure as they currently exist, 2.) the thoughts or motivations of individual bureaucrats within these offices, or 3.) the bureaucratic mechanics of actually making changes to the central office. This capstone seeks to address this gap by examining a real case where individual central office bureaucrats responded to a superintendent making rapid and disruptive change.

III. Methodology

To study the dynamic between reform-minded superintendents and the central office bureaucracies they inherit, I conducted an in-depth, anonymized case study of a new school

⁴⁸ Dale Russakoff, *The Prize: Who’s in Charge of America’s Schools?*, First Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015).

⁴⁹ Lee S. Shulman, “Those Who Understand: Knowledge Growth in Teaching,” *Educational Researcher* 15, no. 2 (1986): 4–14, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1175860>.

⁵⁰ Meredith I. Honig, “District Central Offices as Learning Organizations: How Sociocultural and Organizational Learning Theories Elaborate District Central Office Administrators’ Participation in Teaching and Learning Improvement Efforts,” *American Journal of Education* 114, no. 4 (August 1, 2008): 627–64, <https://doi.org/10.1086/589317>; Meredith I. Honig, “What Does It Take for the District Central Office to Operate as a Learning Organization?,” *ERS Spectrum* 27, no. 4 (2009): 23–33; Meredith I. Honig, “No Small Thing: School District Central Office Bureaucracies and the Implementation of New Small Autonomous Schools Initiatives,” *American Educational Research Journal* 46, no. 2 (2009): 387–422.

superintendent who quickly reshaped the central office of one of the nation's largest school districts during the early 2000s. The case study has been comprehensively anonymized to ensure that all participants in the case study could be candid with their reflections. The name of the school district and other identifying details have been altered. Additionally, all actors mentioned in the case study have been assigned pseudonyms. By anonymizing the district itself, this paper can be far more specific with the actual roles, responsibilities, and decisions of interviewees—information that could otherwise be identifying.

The case study explores a large, diverse southern American city that hereinafter is referred to as “Lindenwood City,” and its school district, Lindenwood City Public Schools (LCPS). I center the study in the early 2000s, with the appointment of Jacob Myer as superintendent of LCPS, and focus on the first year of his term.

I chose to study Myer's tenure because of his disruptive reputation and aggressive reform agenda. The superintendent was known for, as one local media outlet put it, “taking dramatic and unpopular steps,” and “moving fast.” The superintendent attempted to shake up the central office's culture, restructured the office bureaucracy, and fired or pushed out hundreds of employees. The superintendent moved with such speed and force that several school board members publicly compared him to Hitler. Since I am interested in observing what happens when central office bureaucrats are faced with rapid internal reforms, I focused on a superintendent strongly averse to the status quo, given the increased likelihood of being able to observe a bureaucratic response. This case study provides concrete answers to this paper's research questions— directly illustrating the real ways a superintendent attempted to change the central office to quickly implement reforms and the way bureaucrats in the central office responded to those changes.

To guide the case's analysis, I conducted anonymized interviews with five major actors in the school system at the time, including the superintendent, a direct deputy of the superintendent, a middle manager, and two rank and file central office staff.⁵¹ Pseudonyms for each of these interviewees are listed in Figure 1. I reached out to interviewees over email and conducted hour-long interviews over phone calls and video conferences. In the context of central office dynamics, interviews were especially important for the development of this case study. School district central office bureaucrats generally do not speak to the press, and, without contacts, local media rarely reports on the ongoings of these offices. Each interview gave me crucial insight into how the new superintendent changed the office and how those changes were understood within the central office. My goal in each interview was to elicit a story from each actor of their experience during the reform process— their impression of other actors, what actions they took, their regrets, their frustrations, moments of pride, and reflection on the nature of the central office itself. After transcribing the interviews, I categorized comments from each interviewee by subject matter, which, in addition to helping guide the structure of the study, allowed me to see areas of shared or differing analysis between subjects.

I have also relied on 1,328 pages of archived central office documents from Myer's term, other scholars' writings on the district, and a dozen news articles to situate the perspective of each interviewee and to lay out the broader context and politics of these reforms. My analysis is only possible because of the work of archivists, journalists, and other scholars who have built a knowledge base of information about the district during the time of this study.

There are important drawbacks to how I have chosen to approach the case study. While I rely on hundreds of pages of internal documents and news articles to ground my analysis, the

⁵¹ My project was approved by Yale University's Human Subjects Review

case study is based largely on the recollections of only a handful of central office staff who worked in a bureaucracy of hundreds. The information they provided me, while corroborated with other interviewees' remarks and the document base, may still not reflect the true totality of the central office at the time. Additionally, there are obstacles to studying a case that is approximately 20 years old at the time of writing. It was not the norm in the early 2000s to digitize documents. Some important school system actors that would have been helpful to speak with have sadly passed away. Memories have faded. However, given current central office staff's reticence about speaking about their job, the temporal distance allowed former employees to speak candidly with me about their experiences.

As I discuss in the conclusion, I began the study expecting to come to different conclusions than what I ultimately found. Instead of finding overt bureaucratic resistance to a change-maker superintendent, I found sympathetic people on all sides of reform efforts who all believed they were doing the right thing for the district's students. Additionally, as a man without experience as the target of sexism, I was surprised by the gross extent to which female employees were subject to structural sexism and overt harassment in the central office.

The case study is a story of bureaucracy, leadership, and change. It is not a story told in generalizations and makes no normative judgments of the actors involved. The specificity of the case study may confuse some. Some may question why certain details, such as the offices' physical layout or the districts' hiring process, need to be colored with so much specificity. The great inadequacy of so much scholarship on school district central offices is its avoidance of unflashy details. It is true that this is one specific office, with a specific structure, and specific history. This case study's specific lessons— as taken by its reader— may not be generalizable to every office. But as New Yorker essayist Adam Gopnik has written, “the advantage of having a

historical sense is not that it will lead you to some quarry of instructions,” but that it will demonstrate “how hard it is for anyone to control it, including the people who think they’re making it.”⁵² Understanding one specific office in comprehensive depth is a prerequisite to understanding the rich complexity of central offices more broadly and the bureaucrats who work within them.

Interviewee Pseudonym	Role in LCPS
Jacob Myer	Superintendent
Clark Davis	Superintendent’s Deputy
Jimmy Miller	Department Director
Tracey Wilkinson	Clerical worker (Inspector)
Angelie Brown	Clerical worker who rose through the ranks to Project Manager

Figure 1: Chart of interviewees, their pseudonym, and their role in LCPS

V. The Case Study of Lindenwood County Public Schools

We now turn to a real central office, taken over by a disruptive superintendent who moved rapidly to challenge it. This section lays out the case study of Lindenwood City Public Schools (LCPS) centering on the early 2000s, with the appointment of new superintendent Jacob Myer. Examining how the LCPS central office changed and how its employees reacted to their new leader will allow us to begin to answer some of the questions posed at the beginning of this paper.

⁵² Adam Gopnik, “Does It Help to Know History?,” *The New Yorker*, August 28, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/help-know-history>.

The case study will proceed in two parts. First, I will describe the state of LCPS immediately before Myer's appointment. For context, I will provide a brief overview of Lindenwood City and structurally describe the LCPS central office across five categories: hiring procedure, bureaucratic organization, degree of autonomy, and culture. I will then outline the state of the school district before the case study period and Myer's appointment. The second part of the case study will examine the three dimensions of central office reform undertaken by Myer and the perspective of central office workers experiencing those changes. The case study illuminates three critically important lessons about central offices. First, central office structure reflects meaning. How an office is organized affects how central office workers understand their role and reforms that seek to change the central office's structure can, in themselves, convey broader values and ideals. Second, strong-armed reform tactics do not, at least in the short term, appear effective at building buy-in among central office staff. Third, perceptions of reforms and their effectiveness can vary significantly between the superintendent instituting the reforms and the rank and file central office staff directly affected by them.

Part I. Context

A. The Setting and History of LCPS

Located near the Mexican-American border, Lindenwood is a large city known for its yearlong sunny weather. Nearly three million people lived in Lindenwood in the late 1990s. At the time, white and Latino people comprised the majority of the region. Approximately 60 percent of those who lived around Lindenwood identified as white, 30 percent identified as Hispanic or Latino, and 10 percent identified as Asian. Because of a large military base near

Lindenwood City, the area is home to many military families. Historically, Lindenwood City has tilted Republican in national and local elections.

Families in Lindenwood City are served by its vast public school system, LCPS. The school system began in 1850 in a small, one-room school rented out of the local sheriff's house. Over the next 150 years or so, LCPS steadily grew into a sprawling school district enrolling about 150,000 students across nearly 200 schools— putting it in the top 20 largest school districts in the country at the time. In the late 1990s, the school district served a markedly more diverse population than the general demographic makeup of Lindenwood City. During that time period, about 30 percent of LCPS's student body identified as Hispanic, 30 percent identified as non-Hispanic white, 20 percent identified as African American, 10 percent identified as Asian, and 10 percent identified as Filipino. LCPS students also tended to come from disadvantaged families. Close to two-thirds of students in the district qualified for free or reduced-price meals (a common proxy for socioeconomic status in school districts).⁵³ As a consequence of its proximity to the Mexican-American border, LCPS also served a large number of immigrant students who did not speak English as a first language. In the late 1990s, nearly a third of students in LCPS were considered English Language Learners (ELL).

B. The LCPS Central Office in the Late 1990s

To oversee the administration of its nearly 200 schools, LCPS employed a sweeping central office bureaucracy. Internal LCPS documents defined the central office as “any district or instructional administrative cost center where children are not assigned.” In the late 1990s,

⁵³ Sophia E. Day et al., “A School-Level Proxy Measure for Individual-Level Poverty Using School-Level Eligibility for Free and Reduced-Price Meals,” *Journal of School Health* 86, no. 3 (2016): 204–14, <https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12371>.

nearly 900 total positions in the LCPS were employed at the central office. Expenditures for the central office added up to approximately 60 million dollars every year— most of which were costs associated with salaries and benefits.

The LCPS central office was spread across multiple buildings in what was commonly referred to as the LCPS’s “campus” or “educational center.” The offices surrounded a central parking lot. The most senior-level staff worked in the “main building,” the largest of the offices. Other staff worked within walking distance to this main building, either in smaller offices or portable trailers formally referred to as “annexes” and labeled by numbers.

Hiring and Promotion

To understand the LCPS central office, we must begin by breaking down how the bureaucrats who work in it first received their positions. Hiring and promotion practices speak to the heart of any bureaucracy, which is ultimately made up of people. In LCPS, the problems with these processes reflect broader challenges facing the central office at the time.

Most central office employees began their careers in classrooms. A common path to the central office involved being recognized by a principal for excellent teaching, being invited to participate in professional development or district-wide panels, and getting on the radar of central office managers. When an existing central office employee would retire or a position would open up, principals and administrators would push on central office leadership to tap the teacher to fill the role. According to Department Director Jimmy Miller, this traditional pipeline to the central office was a source of tension for other staff that came from the private sector, particularly in departments charged with more operational functions.

Logistically, LCPS followed a fairly uniform, two-stage hiring process for most central office employees, overseen by its Human Relations (HR) department. The district circulated job

postings through newspapers and fliers and invited interested candidates to submit applications. Candidates who applied to jobs would be required to list their level of education and prior experience and undergo a written or oral examination. The content of these exams varied based on the job. For example, applicants seeking to work in school construction underwent basic engineering exams while applicants seeking to work as building inspectors took a planned reading test. Tracey Wilkinson, who handled clerical work, described the exams she experienced:

They test your Microsoft skills. The last ones I did were mostly Excel and Word tests, and they wanted to see whether you knew what you were doing. The system would actually test what keystrokes you were using to complete tasks and ding you for doing things ‘the wrong way.’ The HR people get to decide what kind of test to use— the people who were asking for the job didn’t always have input on the content of the exam.

Applicants would then be ranked by their experience and exam performance. A select number of applicants from this list— although not necessarily the highest-ranked— would be invited to interviews. The nature of interviews depended on the department and seniority of the position, with higher-level positions typically involving larger panels, higher-level interviewers, and more interview stages. As a clerical worker, Angelie Brown only went through one interview. Miller, who applied for a department director position, went through an initial interview panel with five other department directors and then a second interview panel with members of the school board, the deputy superintendent, and the superintendent themselves.

Skepticism towards the fairness of LCPS’s hiring practices was common in the central office. Miller recalled hearing competing interviewees for his department director position “wondering if it was an inside job,” while waiting to go into the interview room. Brown

described to me how a job she applied for was supposedly promised to the son of a senior-level staffer in the school police department. Since Brown performed so well in the interview, the hiring supervisors decided to get approval for two positions— one for Brown and one for the son of the senior-level staffer. The common fear, according to Miller, was that hiring decisions were made “in the proverbial black, dark smoky room.”

Once an employee of the central office, there were two ways to rise in the ranks and be promoted. The first was to apply— a process summarized to me by Wilkinson as “get education, test up, and go.” Current central office employees could go through the same process they did to initially apply, and with more qualifications— such as another degree— and a high test score, they could compete for a higher-status and higher-paying position. This process favored experience and seniority. Brown, who was not chosen for a senior-level position, was told privately by her boss that her candidacy was rejected because she “didn't have enough gray around [her] ears.” From her perspective, “it wasn't that I was passed over because I didn't have the skills; I was passed over because I was too young at 36.”

The second way to be promoted in the office was through reclassifications. In these cases, supervisors examined an employee's responsibilities and, if those everyday duties exceeded the scope of the initial job description, the supervisor would “reclass” the employee to a higher paying position or simply higher pay. Sometimes, but not always, employees received retroactive pay for the period of time they performed outside their initial scope of responsibilities. Reclassifications could be triggered two different ways. The first and more common reclassifications were “class reclassifications.” Classes of employees— such as certain kinds of project managers or typists — would be evaluated on a routine cycle. As an example provided to me by Brown, project managers in the architect's office were assessed for reclassification as a

group every five years following their performance review. Second, and more rarely, employees could be reclassified as individuals. A central office worker could apply for a reclassification if they felt they were going above and beyond their job responsibilities. This process was often drawn out, as described to me by Wilkinson:

What I often did to make my way up is I kept saying, “Yes, I’ll do that.” I kept volunteering for stuff that was outside my job description that no one else really wanted to do. I would say “I’ll take care of that” to my boss and he’d say “Great, go ahead,” but I wouldn’t right away say “And what am I going to get paid for that?” I would just do it. And then later on, I’d say, “Can I get a reclass?” You work out of class without pay for sometimes one to three years, and maybe you’ll get recognition and be able to get that next job.

As I will lay out in subsequent sections, LCPS’s hiring and promotion process in the late 1990s reflected much larger problems that ran throughout the central office: perceptions of internal unfairness, slowness, and over-complexity.

Structure

The sprawling predominately decentralized structure of the LCPS central office in the late 1990s was a reflection of the district’s regionalized approach and influenced how central office employees navigated their work. Understanding the structure of the LCPS central office and the meaningful implications for staff prior to Myer’s appointment as superintendent is critical to understanding how and why he sought to change it.

The LCPS central office in the early 1990s was steeply hierarchical and specialized, as illustrated by the organizational chart depicted in Figure 2. At the very top of the organizational

hierarchy was the superintendent, Taylor Kennedy. Immediately below the superintendent were seven senior staff members, each responsible for overseeing one of seven different divisions within the central office. The Chief Executive Internal Auditor oversaw the Internal Audit Division, the Controller oversaw the Finance Division, the Deputy Superintendent of Administrative Services oversaw the Administrative Services Division, the Deputy Superintendent of Educational and School Services oversaw the Educational and School Services Division, the Executive Director of Communications and Community Relations oversaw the Communications and Community Relations Division, the General Counsel oversaw the General Counsel Division, and the Assistant Superintendent of Planning, Assessment, Accountability, and Development oversaw the Planning, Assessment, Accountability and Development Division. Within each division were departments related to the particular subject matter of the division. Each department was led by a department director, responsible for overseeing the staff of the department and reporting directly to the division head. In many cases, departments were further broken into sub-departments and, in some cases, sub-sub-departments. Each division in the central office had a distinct organizational layout of departments that evolved in response to their different administrative responsibilities. These different structures translated to significant variance across divisions in terms of size, hierarchy, and subject concentration. We can roughly sort the divisions into three size categories.

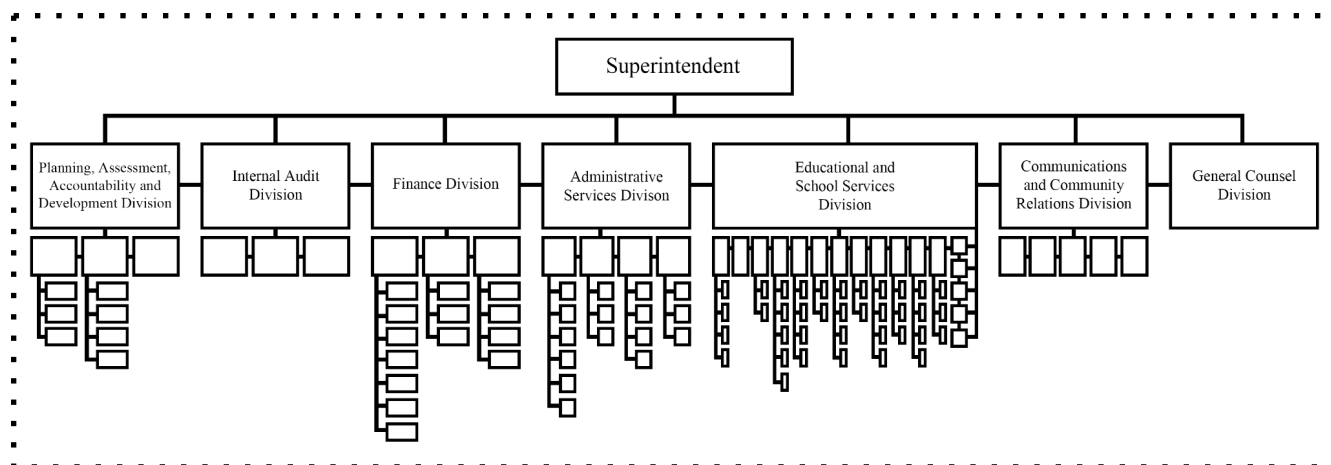


Figure 2: Recreation of LCPS organizational chart in the late 1990s. Blank boxes represent departments and sub-departments. (Sub-sub departments omitted for space)

First, the Internal Audit Division, General Counsel Division, and Communications and Community Relations Division were all relatively small (including few departments) and flat (featuring low levels of hierarchy). Departments within these divisions were mostly co-equal with each other and featured no sub-departments. The main dimension of variance between the three divisions in this size category was subject matter concentration. The Internal Audit Division, for example, included just three departments of auditors undertaking different but fairly similar work in terms of subject matter. On the other hand, the six departments within the Communications and Community Relations Division were far less concentrated around a particular lane of work— featuring distinct departments responsible for functions as disparate as parental involvement and legislative programs.

Second, the Finance Division and Planning, Assessment, Accountability, and Development Division were medium-sized with a greater degree of hierarchy. Both divisions had three main departments that oversaw several sub-departments. For example, in the Finance Division, the Fiscal Control department— one of the main three departments— had four sub-departments: Accounts Payable, Fiscal Accounting, Fiscal Control, and Payroll. Of the two

divisions in this tier, the Finance Division had a greater degree of issue concentration, with most sub-departments within the division sharing a common focus on school finance. The scope of the Planning, Assessment, Accountability, and Development Division (as reflected by its long name) stretched from student assessments to professional development.

Finally, the two largest, most conical, and furthest sprawling divisions were the Administrative Services Division and the Educational and School Services Division. The Administrative Services Division was divided into four departments: Business Services (with six sub-departments), Information Services Bureau (with four sub-departments), School Police Services (with three sub-departments), and Human Resource Services (with three sub-departments, seven sub-sub departments, and one sub-sub-sub department). The Educational and School Services Division division was particularly structurally complex. There was an Educational Services Department above eleven sub-departments that each directly concerned a different school-based program (alternative education, athletics, child development, comprehensive health programs, exceptional education, guidance and race/human relations, humanities, STEM, careers, second language education, and the visual/performing arts). Most of these sub-departments had a handful of sub-sub departments.

In addition to direct oversight from the division head (the Deputy Superintendent for Educational and School Services), each of the sub-departments within the Educational Services Department was overseen by five area superintendents. Each area superintendent was specifically responsible for overseeing the educational services of a handful of high schools and their elementary/middle school feeders.

The area superintendent model reflected a kind of regionalized approach that was common throughout the central office. Structurally, the area superintendent concept inspired

other central office leaders to follow similar logic when organizing their own departments or sub-departments. In reflecting on his management strategy as a department director, Miller described how he adopted this decentralized approach within his department:

I organized my staff by assigning them to a certain regional area. I said “okay, where you guys live, I want you. If you live in the district, I want you guys to work on the project near where you live, because these are your family and friends and colleagues that you see every day,” and that will probably lead to more investment. And they could learn that area and be a better-engaged program project manager for that area. They had the same community groups in the same schools and school community people and the culture within their community...And also what I tried to do is mash the project managers with the area so they knew who their area superintendent was.

The central office’s mix of centralized and decentralized structures led to “a very balkanized system,” as one school board member put it in an interview with local news. Educational programming was decentralized across sprawling, complex divisions and further decentralized by region. The administrative functions necessary for the support of those educational programs, however, were far more centralized in smaller, organized, and structurally straightforward divisions. This asymmetrical arrangement bred a competitive environment for educational program resources within the central office. Myer summarized how he observed this dynamic play out:

You ended up pretty much with a feudal system in which there were barons in different parts of the district and their personal and professional relationships determined the influence that they had. It was a very centralized operation in terms of the budget. Whether they were principals or operating different programs in the central office, the

modus operandi was to approach the financial people in an effort to negotiate a particular allocation. [The head of the Finance Division] was able to move money around pretty much within his own discretion and therefore people would become supplicants to the [the head of the Finance Division] to support their particular program.

Another value reflected by the office's structure was a lack of connection between the rank and file of the central office and the senior-level staff running the district. For one, many of these workers were not even in the same building as the superintendent, their immediate deputies, or other senior-level central office staff. More systematically, the hierarchical chain of command precluded ground-floor central office workers from interacting with the office's leadership. Speaking from her experience as a clerical worker, Brown explained to me:

I never had any interaction with the board members or politics or the superintendent or anyone up the chain. That was the boss or the director. The big office was unapproachable for a person like me and that's what they set up. You're not supposed to go in there and ask questions.

The sprawling, largely decentralized structure of the LCPS central office prior to Myer reflected the regionalized theory of district administration held by the central office's organizational leaders. In turn, this structure influenced how the employees of the central office approached and thought about their work.

Autonomy

In part enabled by the central office's decentralized structure, employees in the LCPS exercised considerable discretion in their work—a dynamic that Myer would later attempt to tamp down on. The degree of autonomy granted to central office workers varied based on one's

department. Both rank and file central office workers I spoke with felt they had a considerable degree of autonomy in their role. Wilkinson told me she was “not the kind of girl that would get micromanaged,” indicating that even one’s autonomy was up to individual discretion in the office. Miller said he “managed by exception” while overseeing his department: setting up his rank and file central office staff with broad objectives and “letting them go” through the project process. He stressed that he “never really got deep into the details on more than a handful of projects in all the years” he served in the central office.

Generally, higher-level employees exercised the greatest scope of discretion in their day-to-day work. This discretion manifested managerially, with department directors given fairly wide freedom in how they chose to structure their offices. In explaining the fairly wide autonomy he had from his higher-up supervisors in the central office as a department director, Miller recounted to me how he successfully refused to fire a subordinate that a higher-up central office staffer directed him to fire. This senior-level discretion also frequently touched on serious programmatic choices. Myers described to me the considerable autonomy leveraged by the head of the Finance Division in his role:

It turned out that [the head of the Finance Division], because he had been there so long, typically ran the show. Nobody could challenge [the head of the Finance Division] when it came to the budget. He was in charge of the budget. That's what people understood him to be responsible for, and he determined what the budget would be. And while he would be responsive to the administration's desires and particularly, specific school board decisions, [the head of the Finance Division] was able to move money around pretty much within his own discretion.

Culture

The LCPS central office's local context, hiring system, structure, and autonomy combined to establish the everyday workplace environment of the bureaucracy. As described by employees who worked there in the late 1990s, the LCPS central office was defined by a culture of sloth, routine incompetence, military attitudes, sexism, and deference to seniority, with— however— growing opportunities for non-white men. Exploring this culture is important for understanding Myer's impression of the bureaucracy upon his appointment and the basis for his changes.

Work in the LCPS central office tended to move slowly. In several interviews, central office staff described the district as a "big ship," with Brown suggesting that it "cannot maneuver quickly enough." As a clerical worker, Wilkinson described routinely waiting six months for answers from other departments in the central office. Routine administrative tasks, like reclassifications, sometimes took years to process. Brown summarized her confrontation with this culture in her early days in the office:

I remember my first week they wouldn't give me very much work. I was finished by 2:30. I'm thinking I need to go home and I have better things to do than sit around here. And I wasn't very good at conforming to the breaks. People would say to me, "Oh, why are you drawing? We're supposed to be on our coffee break" and I'm like, "I've got to finish this detail and then I'll take my break"... There would be these people that would open their lunch box and their crossword puzzle at lunchtime. And that may just go on and on and on. Oh my God, I felt like I was running around and everything else was moving in slow motion.

Different interviewees offered different explanations for the source of this routine slowness. One rationale was the broader difference in expectations between private and public enterprises. Brown explained how particularly frustrated she was given her upbringing watching her father run a small business:

We were in that system of “We're working for government; we're not working for a private entity.” So there's no rush. You're not supposed to run yourself out of work. You're not supposed to, you know, be productive. It wasn't that critical. As long as you got there on time and left on time. You'll find that in public agencies, there are a couple of me and they usually end up moving on to private industry, which is probably what I should have done.

The central office employees who came from the private sector were often those most frustrated with the slowness. Miller described a confrontation between a senior-level employee in the transportation department and a lawyer in the General Counsel Division, where the transportation staffer told the lawyer that he was disappointed he couldn't fire the lawyer as he was able to do when he ran his own transportation company.

Other central office workers described the slowness as a rational reaction to the sensitive nature of school district administration. Wilkinson and Brown recounted often hearing supervisors say no to new ideas, ending those discussions by stating “that's not the way we do it.” Wilkinson told me that it felt like central office employees were “beaten to a pulp to ... follow the rules because the rules are there to protect the larger organization,” and told by senior staff that “this is how it has to be because I was told this is how it has to be.” According to Wilkinson, central office staff then became “disenchanted and they just shut up and sit down.” As Wilkinson put it: this culture could “rot and corrupt people that start to think, ‘why bother?’”

Every central office employee I spoke with mentioned working with difficult colleagues and the way the central office functioned around those employees. Miller, in discussing the other employees he regularly worked with, described one of his colleagues as “incompetent,” and “incapable of functioning,” another as “clueless,” and asserted that the former employee he took his position from was not qualified to have the job. Brown, who was known in the office for her talent, told me that supervisors balanced projects with skilled and unskilled employees. When she was an inspector, she noticed that she was assigned the least capable project managers. When later promoted to a project manager, she was assigned the “D” inspectors that couldn’t read basic construction details and who she “didn’t understand how they got the job.” According to Brown, these kinds of pairings were a strategy by upper-level management to “get the best result.” Beyond incompetence, some interviewees shared anecdotes about odd upper-level management practices that employees had to work around. Wilkinson claimed that she knew an administrator who dictated that all her paper had to be pink— requiring her secretaries replace all the manila folders in her office as well as scanning and reprinting any memo onto pink paper before delivering it to her.

Because of the large military presence in Lindenwood City, LCPS employed many veterans, particularly for senior-level positions. As a consequence, the culture of LCPS reflected the military. Structurally, if an employee had questions or complaints about the district, Brown told me “you have to go through the military protocol and the chain.” Wilkinson described promotions functioning the same way— one “moved up within the system” in a “very militaristic” hierarchy. Three of Wilkinson’s four supervisors were ex-military. She described how those supervisors enforced “a uniform of the day” and “a plan of the day we had to stand and deliver.” Wilkinson joked that it often felt as if she was “in the military-lite.” Miller was a

veteran and said that his time in the military prepared him to lead his department by giving him management experience. Wilkinson told me that, within the central office, ex-military managers were divided into two camps: old-military and new-military. The old-military mindset was, as she described, “do it this way; I don't care if it ends up stupid: you're doing it this way” whereas the new-military mindset was “here’s generally our goal: meet the goal and if you miss the mark, we're going to talk about it, we're going to redirect and you're going to head off and meet the goal again.”

The female central office workers I spoke with described a deep-rooted culture of sexism within the office. Some of this sexism was manifested in overt, interpersonal acts. Miller told me that he often told his subordinates, “if you see me walking down the street with my dick hanging out, tell me” as a rallying cry. Another interviewee described being hit on the behind with a stack of memos after a meeting. When she complained, her department underwent an anti-harassment training, which she described as a culture shock for her male colleagues, but ultimately ineffective:

I was pissed because he thought that was okay to do. Everybody got sexual harassment training where, you know, they couldn't believe that you can't give girls elevator eyes. You're not supposed to do that. They didn't understand that if it made me uncomfortable, then it's not right. There was the whole system process. But did things change? Well, he never slapped me again, but you can tell that it was never going to change.

The sexism was also manifested structurally. As a minor example, the central office had a dress code that included requirements such as mandating any female employee wear nylons if they wore a dress with exposed legs. More broadly, both female interviewees described the

office as a “good old boys club,” where men dominated leadership positions, men passed over qualified women to promote each other, and the women in the office mainly served clerical roles.

At the same time, Kennedy— who was a person of color— had been intentionally working to expand opportunities for women and other people of color in the office. Brown believed her ability to rise through the ranks of central office was a direct consequence of the superintendents’ elevation of non-white men to leadership positions:

I think the only reason why I got promoted was because during [Kennedy’s] era, [Kennedy] had hired and promoted many [people of color], and there had been an African-American man that got promoted to be a supervisor under the department director. And he was the first African-American to get a [senior position] with the district, and he made it a point that he wanted to hire the first female [senior position] for the district.

In the late 1990s, the LCPS central office was a structurally complex system that faced challenges not uncommon to public bureaucracies of its size: balkanization, slowness, and sexism.

C. State of LCPS in the late 1990s

As a school district, LCPS in the late 1990s was struggling. A majority of 2nd through 11th-grade students were performing below average in state math and reading assessments. Less than 40 percent of high school students performed at grade level on a national assessment. An achievement gap between students of different races, different neighborhoods, and different socioeconomic statuses was not budging. Black and Hispanic students in the district routinely performed 30 to 40 percentage points lower than their white peers on math and reading exams.

The American Civil Liberties Union accused LCPS of having “unequal distribution of educational resources and lowered expectations regarding the abilities of poor and minority students,” arguing that the county had “two school districts:” one for the “haves” and one for the “have nots.” Lindenwood City’s business community, represented by the local Chamber of Commerce, was also growing frustrated with what they perceived as unqualified graduates and began calling for change in the school system.

Exacerbating the system’s troubles, the teacher’s union voted by a 3-to-1 margin to go on strike in the late 1990s. Teachers in the district had not received a cost-of-living increase in several years and negotiations over salary increases broke down. The president of the teacher’s union at the time cited frustrations not only with wages but school governance, complaining of the district’s turn towards “more top-down decisionmaking and less collaboration.” The strike brought a great deal of attention to the school district’s worsening challenges and deepened distrust in LCPS’s leadership.

Spurred in large part by the teacher’s strike, Lindenwood’s business community got involved in school board elections, helping elect new members interested in a change in district leadership. A few years later, the school board chose to not renew Kennedy’s contract and seek out a new “change agent” as the next district’s leader. By the early 2000s, the school board privately voted 3-2 to appoint Jacob Myer as superintendent.

D. Announcement of Jacob Myer

Myer was an untraditional candidate for chief of a school system. He had spent his career in law, not education. After graduating from law school, Myer worked in high-profile positions in the US government and prestigious law firms around Lindenwood City. Myer’s appointment

was part of a trend of large urban school districts selecting nontraditional superintendents and charging them with aggressive reform mandates.⁵⁴ In Lindenwood City, the school board president went on the local news in the days following Myer's appointment and told the public "we chose him because the community spoke clearly with one voice that they wanted a change agent." The board president declared that the district was "looking to focus the whole system on raising student achievement, starting from the teachers in the classroom... to the central office."

To the public, Myer's appointment was contentious. His work as an attorney on immigration issues angered a coalition of activists organizations, who suggested his appointment was "inappropriate and insensitive" for a district that served so many immigrant families. The school board members who privately voted against Myer believed he was too connected to Lindenwood City's business community. The president of the teacher's union opposed Myer, in part, because he had a positive working relationship with the previous superintendent.

In the central office, Myer's appointment excited some. Part of the optimism towards Myer stemmed from the positive impact of a fresh slate. Between low student performance, the teacher's strike, and a recent public ethics scandal sparked by a department director, morale in the central office was low. Brown explained that "you don't want to work for a company or a school district that has bad PR" and the bad headlines plaguing LCPS "makes us [central office staff] look bad." She said that "when you see something new and fresh, you hope." Others were enthusiastic about Myer's appointment because of his nontraditional credentials and promise for change. Wilkinson told me that "when Myer came in, I was kind of excited because I felt like we were going to run more efficiently." She speculated that "those that like to hide and not work hard may have been nervous." Miller summarized a similar sentiment:

⁵⁴ Jordana Hart, "Increasingly, School Districts Seek Nontraditional Chiefs," Baltimore Sun, April 9, 1995, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1995-04-09-1995099098-story.html>.

Well, when I first heard that an [attorney] who was [working] along the border was going to be our superintendent, I kind of thought that was kind of cool. You know, that seems like, basically he was a non-standard typical superintendent, right? So he was coming out of [the government], he was an attorney. And so my mind was open. I was actually kind of excited for [Jacob].

Shortly after he was announced as LCPS's next superintendent, Myer called all of LCPS's administrators— including central office department directors— to a high school cafeteria to introduce himself. In the meeting, Myer broadly laid out his agenda for the district, including a “game plan for education” and cuts to the central office to “get rid of the fat.” Miller, who was at the meeting, recalled Myer saying “I want you to look to your left and you look to your right, some of you will not be here next year.” Reflecting on that moment, Miller, who was initially excited about Myer, said “that to me, right there— I just stopped listening.”

Myer was publicly announced as the new superintendent in March but had three months before he was officially sworn in and appointed. Reflecting on his mindset at the outset of this transition period, Myer said he appreciated the need “to understand who was who and where they were before you went out with broad rhetorical declarations.” He took an office in the main building of the central office to begin to understand the workings of the bureaucracy he was about to inherit. Myer requested local business leaders establish a management fund, which he used to pay for an external consultant to map out the central office. Myer called approximately 20 senior central office staff members into his temporary office for interviews, to both better understand the departments they oversaw and their potential personal assets for his administration. After the first month and a half, Myer believed he understood “who would be on board and who would be a problem in terms of the new order of things.”

In this transition period, Myer came to two important judgments about the state of the central office. First, Myer concluded that his predecessor “was a fairly weak leader and not terribly interested in management.” To Myer, “there are two dimensions to the job of superintendent: one is being a manager and the others being a leader— and the previous superintendent was neither, frankly.” Second, Myer realized the central office, though critically important for the execution of his agenda, was not necessarily a politically sensitive object to transform. He explained:

The central office is not a strong player politically. It's a monumentally strong player bureaucratically, but you don't find many people in school districts supporting the central office... Nobody defends the central office as a matter of theory. You defend the particular program or you defend a particular administrator, but nobody says, “Oh, the central office needs to be strengthened”... The practice typically is they perpetuate their own position and people don't know how to change it or don't care to change it. But nobody is out there saying we need more central office people. I mean, it's a whipping post. Nobody rhetorically is saying, “Oh yes, let's starve the schools and beef up the central office.”

After three months of studying LCPS and preparing for his term as its leader, Myer set his sights on the central office.

Part II. Dimensions of Central Office Reform

As part of his reform agenda, Myer changed the central office across at least three dimensions in his first year: culture, structure, and personnel.

A. Culture

Myer believed that the culture in the LCPS central office was fundamentally broken: plagued by a lack of focus on classrooms, deep-rooted fear of change, and tolerance for incompetence. In his first year, he set out to reculture the office. From Myer's perspective, this reculturing put classrooms back at the center of the central office's work and was, at times, achieved through threats. From the interviewees I spoke with who worked in the central office, Myer's strong-armed tactics themselves became the baseline culture of the office. According to these interviewees, this culture led to more resentment than buy-in of Myer's new values.

Myer thought that the central office had strayed from its core mission of supporting teaching and learning in schools. He lamented that "one of the real handicaps of public education is that it's a system that seems geared and implemented through the central office to give adults what adults want for their jobs, rather than what students and children need for their education." He wanted workers in the central office to see themselves as educators. He told his staff that "we're here to support teaching and learning, and you're part of that and you're an educator, even though you're not in the classroom." Myer created a new, simplified mission statement for the district that stated, "the mission of Lindenwood City Schools is to improve student achievement by supporting teaching and learning in the classroom." The mission statement was printed at the bottom of all central office memos.

Myer sought to make this message resonate with every part of the central office, including administrative departments that were removed from day-to-day educational programming. Myer tried, for example, to make "bus drivers understand that they were part of an educational system, not a transportation company." As a demonstration of his commitment to this new culture, Myer demoted 13 principals early in his tenure, telling his staff that those

individuals “would not accept the role that we believe principals should play” as educators. Instead, Myer said they had grown too “comfortable not being involved in the instructional program and instead saw themselves as school ground administrators rather than as instructional leaders.” The early firings were part of an attempt by Myer to convey to his staff that change needed to be embraced throughout the system. Myer made the assessment that “people don't like change typically, particularly in school districts and particularly in school district bureaucracies, where they have been operating for many years, in many cases with considerable autonomy.” In his mind, central office workers “would not be interested in change unless their cheese were moved, so to speak.” He wanted his central office staff to understand that “there would be consequences for staying put, and in particular consequences for resisting the change.” This message was received throughout the school district. After talking with staff across LCPS, a local newspaper concluded that the demotions “fueled perceptions that [Myer] was an intimidating force and not to be questioned.”

From the accounts of several interviewees I spoke with, Myer often relied on these kinds of strong-armed leadership tactics to try and reinforce his intended values for the office—ultimately obfuscating the values in the process. Miller, who worked closely with Myer as a department director before departing for another school district, said that “he was just the kind of leader I can't work for: fear, sarcasm, ridicule, threats and all kinds of stuff like that.” In one anecdote Miller shared with me, he claimed that Myer regularly “took delight” at verbally insulting a particular employee to the point of “leaving her in tears in meetings.” Miller suggested this kind of behavior was common from Myer and that Myer's leadership style often amounted to “psychological battering of people.”

These kinds of aggressive management tactics were received poorly by many of the staff I interviewed— particularly for those with direct interactions with Myer. Instead of spurring central office staff to internalize Myer’s commitment to instruction, the strong-armed tactics led to animosity against their new leader. Miller told me that “there were not a lot of happy people in the middle management ranks around the district at the time.” A central office staffer wrote to the teachers’ union president stating that “we work in an environment here of hostility and/or fear of retribution and ostracization if we are not part of the inner cycle.” Many in the central office had good relationships with the previous superintendent and were disappointed by Myer’s more aggressive approach. Describing the general mood of the central office at the time, Miller told me:

It was just unbelievable. Just a travesty... It was like watching everything that [Taylor Kennedy]— who is a collaborative [person of color], math teacher, and brilliant person but collaborative as all hell— be torn down ... and just really, you know, a great culture, and when I think of Myer, it was like you know, the dark and the light.

Myer’s reculturing of the LCPS central office was understood very differently by Myer and the rank and file central office staff experiencing the new work environment. From Myer’s perspective, he was shifting the office to embracing instruction as the core of their work and occasionally using forceful tactics to do so. But from some central office staff’s vantage point, those occasional tactics themselves became the culture and the strong-armed approach bred more resentment than buy-in.

B. Structure

Shortly after he was sworn in, Myer substantially overhauled the central office structure, not to just be more efficient, but to itself symbolize his focus on instruction. Myer wanted to move past the old central office organizational shape— whose structure he believed implied the accumulation of old leaders’ approaches— and instead build a bureaucracy that reflected his reform vision.

Based on what he learned during his transition, Myer was critical of the existing central office organizational chart. He believed that the mix of centralized and decentralized structures within the office created a “feudal system... with pockets of power all over the place without many coordination links.” Myer thought the prior superintendent had “too many people reporting directly to him,” which he viewed as a “prescription for chaos, or inaction, depending on the particular circumstance.” Structurally Myer’s mantra was “simple is better.” He wanted to limit the number of people directly reporting to him and limit how many people would be in leadership meetings. Substantively, Myer wanted the reorganization to reflect his commitment to teaching and learning.

On its face, Myer’s new structure for the central office was simpler than that under prior superintendents. Instead of seven main divisions, Myer divided the central office into three “major operating branches:” the Administrative/Operational Support branch, the Center for Learning, and the Center on Collaborative Activities. Myer also moved several preexisting, independent central office functions into an expanded “Office of the Superintendent.” Each branch was assigned its own manager that formally reported directly to the Office of the Superintendent. Most of the central office’s old divisions were placed under each branch, with some departments elevated to the status of divisions. In some ways, the restructuring made the

central office more conical: introducing a new layer of hierarchy for divisions that used to directly report to the superintendent but now had to report to their branch manager. For the departments that were promoted to divisions, the number of management layers remained the same. In the old structure, these former departments reported to the person who ran their division. Now, as divisions, they reported it to the branch manager.

Some of the reorganization was symbolic. Myer changed his title from “Superintendent of Schools” to “Superintendent of Public Education” to imply a greater focus on teaching and learning over just operations. As demonstrated in Figure 3, the school district organizational chart— which lays out the bureaucratic structure of the central office— was flipped from how it had previously been designed. Instead of the superintendent at the top of the pyramidal hierarchy, the role was now drawn at the bottom. “Lindenwood City Public Schools” was drawn at the top of the chart, above the three major operating branches, which were above the Office of the Superintendent.

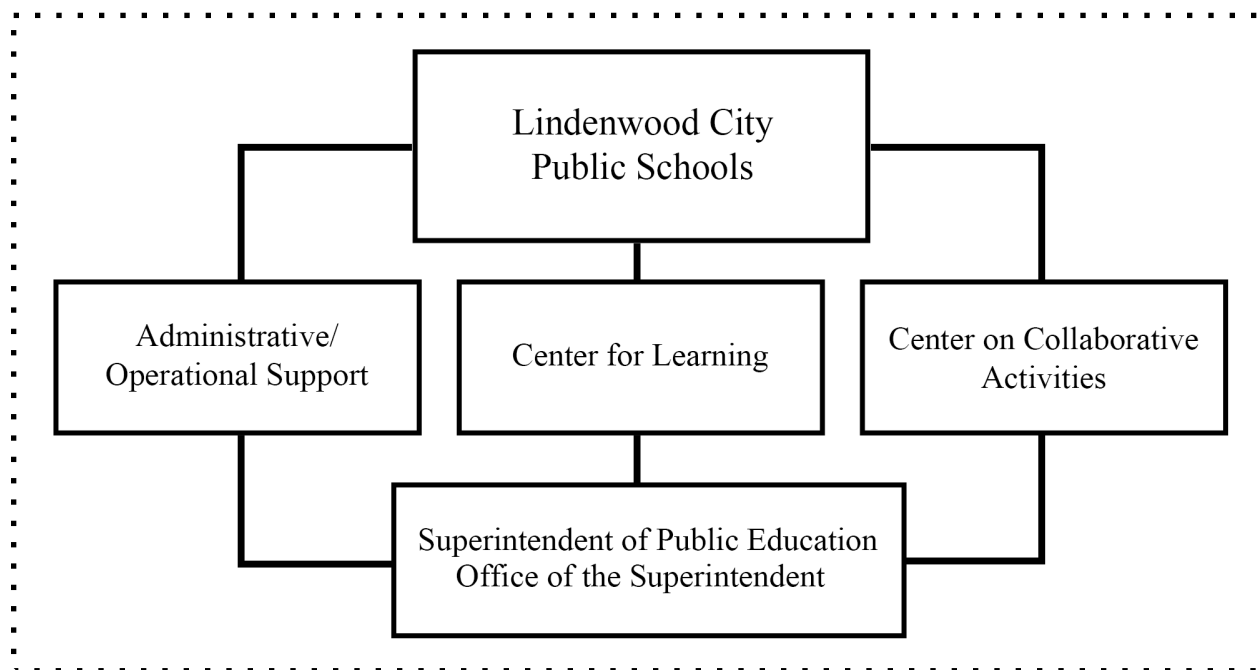


Figure 3: Recreation of LCPS organizational chart after Myer’s first restructuring

As a core part of the restructuring, Myer expanded The Office of the Superintendent—bringing in several divisions that Myer thought warranted direct oversight and control. The General Counsel Division became “Legal Services” and was placed in the office. The Special Education Division, which was under legal scrutiny at the time, was also moved into the Office of the Superintendent. Myer, who understood the importance of public relations, expanded and revamped LCPS’s Communications and Community Relations Division within his office. One of Myer’s most structurally significant moves in asserting control over the school system bureaucracy was establishing a chief of staff position within his office. At the time, very few superintendents around the country employed chiefs of staff. Myer, however, diagnosed much of the central office’s problems to a lack of rigorous oversight. He wanted a loyal actor in the central office who would keep his reform policies on track and the sufficient authority and power to do so. As he explained, he decided a new chief of staff position would meet these managerial needs:

In any bureaucracy, you've got a lot of moving parts and in a bureaucracy that operates as a hub-and-spoke (which school districts typically do), there are problems of coordination, particularly if the ideas to lead change. Change requires a lot of coordination and a lot of follow-up to the giving of orders and the attempt to persuade... The idea of having a chief of staff as opposed to having the superintendent and an assistant superintendent was that an assistant superintendent wouldn't carry the authority that a chief of staff would.

Myer’s prior experience in the federal government was influential in his decision to use the position and, ultimately, his selection of a chief of staff. Myer tapped Thomas Barnes, a retired military leader and former colleague, for the position. Myer worked closely with Barnes

during his time in the federal government and therefore trusted him to carry out the functions Myer envisioned for the chief of staff role. He explained how he selected Barnes:

“[Thomas] was a particularly talented operator, having been in a very efficient organization in the [military]. He understood how to go about doing that. I had worked with him previously and when I was working for the federal government. And [Thomas] was my principal person for putting together coalitions among local law enforcement agencies and federal law enforcement agencies to accomplish particular operations... So I understood what we needed. [Thomas] understood how to do it.”

Because Myer had so much confidence in Barnes, he bestowed his chief of staff with a significant degree of authority in the central office. While Barnes was directly responsible for running a handful of departments within the Office of the Superintendent, he was charged more broadly with oversight of the entire school district bureaucracy. The senior-level staff that oversaw each of the central office’s branches technically reported directly to Myer but, operationally, they went through the Chief of Staff. Barnes coordinated the “Executive Committee” of the central office— composed of the leaders responsible for each of the three major operating branches in the office.

The first branch, Administrative/Operational Support, housed all of the central office’s administrative and operational functions, covering everything from school lunches to school libraries. The branch mostly consisted of what used to be the Administrative Services Division—including the Business Services Department and the Human Resource Services Department, which were elevated to divisions under the branch. The preexisting Finance Division and Educational Services Division were also placed under the branch, removing their direct connection with the superintendent and making them co-equal with the two divisions that had

formerly been departments. The branch was overseen by the “Chief Administrative Officer,” a new title for the central office manager who had formerly gone as the “Deputy Superintendent of Administrative Services.”

The second branch, the Center on Collaborative Activities, led by an Executive Director, centralized community input mechanisms in the central office. During his transition period, Myer discovered over 100 active formal advisory committees with ambiguous charges and indefinite tenures. The groups had been used by previous superintendents as proxies for different stakeholder grounds in the community. Myer observed that “they were the groups the district bargained with for buy-in.” Central officer leaders would rely on the groups to lend legitimacy to programmatic decisions, often suggesting that if a group representing a certain stakeholder demographic supported a plan, then the entire stakeholder demographic was similarly supportive. In his first 18 months in office, Myer disbanded every existing committee in the central office that was not legally required. In their place, the Center on Collaborative Activities branch formalized the way the central office was to— as described by one central office document — “ensure sustainable collaborative interaction, ventures and results... within and across divisions, departments, and programmatic units and between the school district and the community.” The branch had separate “collaboratives” for policymaking, civic participation, new teaching and learning environments, applied learning, student wellness, labor relations, and administrative services. In addition to oversight from the branch’s Executive Director, each collaborative reported to the part of the central office that dealt with its lane of study. For example, the Collaborative for Labor Relations reported directly to the Administrative/Operational Support branch.

The third branch, The Center for Learning, comprised most parts of the central office that dealt with school programs. As Myer prepared to lead LCPS, he became interested in a newly popularized view of the superintendency that divided a superintendent's responsibilities into three main categories: management, politics, and instruction. Myer was confident about his ability to keep LCPS operating efficiently and to negotiate with stakeholders in order to secure resources for the district. But, even as Myer hoped to focus his central office entirely on education, he understood he was not an educator. Myer knew he needed someone with experience in schools to lead the district's substantive instructional agenda. After consulting with faculty at the Harvard Education School, Myer reached out to Eric Rossini, a school district leader in the East Coast. Rossini had cultivated a positive reputation in education reform circles for increasing academic achievement in his district through greater attention to teaching. As superintendent, Rossini dramatically downsized his district's central office and used those funds for teacher training and principal professional development. Myer was struck by Rossini's "singular focus on improving teaching as the vehicle for improving student achievement," and inspired by his work to build a leaner central office organization around instruction.

Myer tapped Rossini to lead the Center for Learning branch as LCPS's first "President of Instruction." Myer viewed his role as facilitating the politics and operations necessary for Rossini to carry out his educational vision for the district. Myer "wanted [Rossini] focused exclusively on the instructional challenge."

The Center for Learning branch represented a stark structural departure from the previous central office's Educational and School Services Division. The Planning, Assessment, Accountability and Development Division was placed under the branch. The area superintendent model was abolished and replaced with "instructional leaders." Instructional leaders still worked

directly with school sites but had a far narrower charge. Instructional leaders were responsible for ensuring that the branch's teaching and learning reforms were being carried out in schools. The area superintendents' previous administrative and operational functions did not carry over. Additionally, Myer did away with the regionalized, cluster-based approach that had been previously used to organize the area superintendents. Instructional leaders formed and led "Learning Communities" of 25 principals from different parts of the district. The previous structure of 11 programmatic divisions was consolidated into two: the Curriculum, Teacher Development, and Accountability Division and the Literacy Division. Myer also created a new Research/Policy Division that worked directly with an out-of-state university's education research center to apply new developments "in the various areas of instruction" to LCPS.

One of the defining themes of Myer's first central office reorganization was a focus on building new bureaucratic structures in the central office. In theory, it is easier to build a new bureaucratic unit than reorient an existing one. The larger strokes of Myer's institution-building were transparent, such as the creation of the Center for Learning and Center on Collaborative Activities as two major operating branches and the development of the chief of staff position. Much of this effort, however, happened on a smaller scale throughout all parts of the office. Speaking from his experience as a department director, Miller recounted to me how Myer assembled panels outside of existing central office hierarchies to reorganize individual departments and specifically how Myer "forced a panel down [his] throat."

Under previous superintendents, the central office's work was balkanized as a consequence of its partially decentralized structure. In reshaping the office's organization, Myer created a central office organizational design that itself centered on teaching and learning. These

structural reforms reflected Myer's understanding of the meaning of organizational shape and its importance for how his employees would carry out their work.

C. Existing Personnel

No matter how they are structured, organizations are ultimately made up of people. Myer inherited about 900 central office workers who had been hired and trained under different superintendents. Myer found that many of these existing employees resisted his reforms. While he figured out how to surmount some of this resistance, Myer believed that to execute his change agenda, he needed to change his staff. His efforts to manage inherited employees can be generally divided into how he approached senior-level management and how he approached the rank and file of the central office. In both cases, Myer's outwardly stated intentions and recollections diverge from the perceptions of the central office staff affected by his efforts.

Resistance

In his first year, Myer encountered what he called "resistors:" central office staff who would stall, subvert, or question reforms. The most common form of resistance Myer saw came from central office employees slow-walking changes. Myer described this kind of resistance as subtle, "passive aggressive," and often behind the scenes. He explained to me that "people don't typically come to the CEO and tell the CEO that 'I'm resisting what you're trying to get done'... but in the course of implementation, certainly the Chief of Staff would become aware of people who were dragging their feet." According to Myer, resistors outwardly agreed with the reforms, but "in their actions and in their attitudes," would stall different approaches in an attempt to protect "against change that would adversely affect their position as employees." Myer leveraged

his Chief of Staff, with his considerable access and broad authority, to crack down on stalling throughout the office. He explained:

[The Chief of Staff] understood that there needed to be deadlines and that deadlines needed to be met. Or if something were to be delayed, there'd have to be a pretty damn good reason why it was delayed. So it's just introducing a rigor and an energy and a discipline to central office functions that make the change, as opposed to "Oh, I need another 60 days." If you need another 60 days, you'd better come in with a pretty damn good demonstration of why.

The other common form of resistance Myer encountered came from the central office's culture of uncertainty around change. Almost all of the central office staff I interviewed who worked under prior administrations expressed similar frustrations with often being told that since "we've never done it that way," that's "not the way we do it." As Myer put it, "there'll always be a good reason why something shouldn't change." According to Miller, who worked in the central office prior to Myer, the General Counsel's division was a frequent hurdle to new approaches. The attorneys in the division would say that "the law says you can't do it," and the discussion over new approaches would often end there. With his background in law, Myer was uniquely able to surmount resistance from this office. He explained:

Because I've been a practicing attorney, I understood the legal system and I understood legal arguments. You know, very few legal issues of any consequence can be answered yes or no. So if a general counsel came to me, as they have in other bureaucracies, and they say, "you can't do it," I say, "well, now you have to tell me why. And now you have to actually explain to me what the reasoning is." Don't come to me with a "you can't do it," because I'm a little more sophisticated about the way the legal system operates. You

have to tell me what the basis for your reasoning is, and you then have to tell me what you've done to try to change that and what the options are.

Still, Myer was interested in not only overcoming individual acts of resistance of existing central office staff but also addressing the resisters themselves as employees. His approach was different for high-level central office managers and rank and file central office employees.

Senior Level Management

Myer inherited seasoned division heads and department directors throughout the central office. Myer disagreed with how many of these employees had approached their work under previous superintendents. However, these senior staffers' decades of experience in LCPS came with deep political connections to community groups, the school board, and the powerful teacher's union. Wholly removing these managers from the central office posed potential political blowback that could derail and distract from Myer's reform agenda. Myer approached this problem in two ways: reorienting and pushing out.

A.) Reorienting

In his first year, Myer kept many existing senior-level central office staff in their prior roles. The Chief Administrative Officer, Controller, Budget Director, and all of the top instructional roles were held by holdovers from the previous superintendent's tenure. Myer told me that his criteria for who to retain was: "who was on board with the program?" According to Myer, the threat of removal was enough for many of these senior-level staffers to go along with his agenda. In conversations with the head of the Finance Division (who had previously exercised significant autonomy over budgets and wielded considerable internal power), Myer

straightforwardly told him that he would be removed if he did not acquiesce to his new limited discretion and management by the Chief of Staff. Myer felt that this expression of his new order was strengthened by the strong political mandate he had in the early days of his tenure. He explained that:

I developed very quickly an understanding with [the head of the Finance Division] that that's not the way I intended to operate... The initial discussion with [the head of the Finance Division] was quite straightforward. Because of the political atmosphere in which I had been brought in, he knew that, as they say in Spanish, “antes como antes y ahora como ahora:” then was then and now is now. They had a leadership at the school district that had a point of view and intended to see it implemented. He understood that the reason I had been selected was the desire for change and that this was going to be a reform administration that necessarily would apply and involve the reallocation of funds... Frankly, you know, I would have fired him if he had a different approach to this.

B.) Pushing Out

Myer also inherited senior-level employees that he thought did not “understand that the imperative was change” and that he believed would actively resist his reform agenda. Because of their community ties, there was potential blowback from straightforwardly removing these employees. While Myer never explicitly articulated it as a strategy, several interviewees I spoke with who were in this position felt like they were pushed out of the central office. Even as Myer may not have understood his efforts as such, pushing out recalcitrant central office staff appears to have been one of Myer’s strategies in reshaping the office’s personnel. Central office employees felt Myer mount this pressure in at least three different ways.

First, and most passively, Myer made it clear that anyone in the central office uninterested in LCPS's new direction should leave. As part of his effort to broadly reculture the office, Myer constantly reiterated his reform agenda with the explicit suggestion that those who were not on board with change did not belong in the central office. In a public meeting before he was sworn in, Myer told his staff that "there will be two types of district employees: those who teach and those who support teaching and learning and that's it." Many senior-level staffers got the message and stepped down or sought jobs in other school districts. Brown, who watched the changes in leadership, observed that many older employees "chose to retire or move on" in the early days of Myer's tenure.

Second, on an interpersonal front, Myer appears to have treated managers he hoped to push out with particular disrespect. Clark Davis, a deputy to the superintendent, told me that Myer stopped talking to him halfway through Myer's first year. According to Davis, Myer simply refused to communicate with him. Miller told me that Myer walked into his office, told him that he wanted the director to reapply for his position as a department director and compete in a "nationwide search for the best person." Miller resigned later that year, telling me:

I wasn't going to wait around. I've been through enough. I mean, I was sitting on a warhead, having missiles shot at me doing border control in Korea, so I'm not going to stick around when some guy is just being a prick. Especially when I could go find a better job working for somebody that wants me and that I like.

Third, Myer transferred some senior-level central office workers to newly-constituted departments that seemed, on their face, co-equal with their previous positions but were operationally powerless. One of these individuals was Davis, who had previously overseen the division that became Rossini's Center for Learning. Davis had good working relationships with

senior members of the teacher's union and had helped negotiate the end of the latest teachers' strikes. Myer changed Davis's position title to imply a more direct reporting role to the superintendent. In theory, the new position would be operationally responsible for overseeing a broad swath of departments recently moved into the Office of the Superintendent. Myer told Davis that the new role would be "significant," and he would be in charge of "working on special projects." As Myer described the new role, Davis "realized that the portfolio I had would be the portfolio Myer gave me." Davis recounted that "after a while, I had nothing to do," at which point he said, "I realized my days were probably coming to an end in [Lindenwood City]." Myer's outward description of the position and the deputy superintendent's understanding of the position after several months diverged significantly. Myer's possibly intentional creation of this gap eventually pushed Davis out of the central office.

Central Office Rank and File

Early in his transition period, Myer decided that he wanted to downsize the central office. Myer justified the downsizing largely on functional grounds, arguing that savings from a slimmer central office could be used to directly support teaching and learning in schools. But to many central office staffers, the firings appeared more pragmatic and symbolic: allowing Myer to remove rank and file employees that Myer or his allies disliked and score political points by playing into his public message that the district was pivoting to focus on instruction.

In December, Myer requested the school board grant him the authority to reduce central office expenditures by at least five percent. With their approval, he formed a task force to study every part of the central office for possible position cuts. The task force's charge was to develop a "reorganization plan" with a timeline, facts and assumptions about the current status of the

central office, criteria for “reallocation,” and recommendations for which positions to cut. The task force was composed of the deputy to the President of Instruction, the director of the Professional Development Department, the Chief Administrative Officer, the new Chief of Staff, and Davis in his new deputy superintendent role. The timeline for the task force was short. It convened for the first time in January and was expected to complete the reorganization plan by the beginning of March.

One of the task force’s first moves was sending a letter to every division and department head, along with a double-sided form. The letter asked managers to use the form to identify what could be cut from their department to achieve a three percent cost reduction, five percent cost reduction, and seven percent cost reduction, respectively. The backside of the form was intended for managers to explain the impact of those potential cuts. The letter stressed that managers could “use no more than the form provided to describe the impact of the elimination.” The task force, the letter said, would not consider any additional documents. Division and department managers were to send the form back just ten days after the letter was distributed.

The task force’s written list of facts and assumptions included acknowledgments of the difficulties of the reorganization, including that “the reorganization will require a tremendous investment of staff time,” “rumors and miscommunications will occur,” and “employee morale will be impacted.” According to several central office staff I spoke with, fears of the impending cuts rippled through the central office. Miller described the mood in the office as “brutal,” explaining that “everybody was waiting for the other shoe to drop.” The head of the teacher’s union told the local news that “people are expecting massive cuts, but it’s the not knowing that is so hard” since “nobody knows who and where the cuts will affect.”

Days before the reorganization details were announced, Myer convened all managers in the central office. His prepared talking points for that meeting began with Myer “commending you for the thoughtful work you submitted in January in response to the directive to identify possible function reductions in your respective departments,” but acknowledging that “the personnel reductions in the organization I will be recommending to the Board this Tuesday are considerably deeper than those you submitted. Much deeper.” After this statement, Myer wrote, “(pause).” He concluded by thanking the managers “in advance for doing whatever it will take to help the central office through the upcoming transition period,” recognizing that “I know it will be both challenging and painful, but I ask that you keep our kids in mind as you do your part to make the new district organization structure a reality.”

The day before the specific reorganization plan was announced, meetings were held with every employee whose job was being eliminated or changed. A four-page list of “suggested speaking points” was given to the managers responsible for breaking the news to their subordinates. The talking points urged managers to “keep to the script” and avoid using “platitudes or gratuitous comments” praising the employee’s contributions. If asked whether the individual firing was the manager’s decision, the talking points directed managers to either say “yes” or “I am aware of the decision.” Wilkinson was initially fired during these cuts. She described to me her experience the day before the cuts were publicly announced:

I got invited up to the Chief Administrative Officer’s office. And usually when I got invited to his office, I was fixing his computer because we didn't have a lot of computer support, even for those people... His office called me and said, “come on over,” and I am thinking, “OK, I wonder what's wrong with his computer again?” And I walk in and they go “have a seat long” at this long table in the conference room. They want me to sit at the

very end. OK, no computer, and I'm walking in and I see the director of H.R., I see the Chief Administrative Officer (who was my boss's boss) and my boss was sitting there with a funny look on his face. He had been told five minutes before I walked in that I had been rifted... They say "we're here to tell you that you're fired." Okay. Then they told me all my options, and by then I can't hear a word. I figure I'll worry about that later. All I'm thinking about is walking across that long parking lot to Annex 2 with the TV cameras outside. Yeah. So I breathe, I left... I had my husband come pick me up and I left and I came back in about three hours and was able to finish the day. That was awful. And my heart broke, and I didn't really love the place as much anymore. Never got that back.

Employees who were fired had a handful of options within LCPS. Those with teaching credentials could reapply for a classroom job. Those without teaching credentials could reapply for new jobs in the central office. Employees could also request a hearing. According to Myer, under prior superintendents, high-level managers who lost their jobs in central office reorganizations were offered an "automatic job as principal or vice-principal to soften the blow." This time, Myer's strict new hiring standards for school-based administrators precluded that kind of transfer. In the distributed talking points, managers were directed to urge fired employees "not to wait for opportunities inside the organization."

The day after fired employees were informed that their positions had been cut, the task force formally presented their recommendations to the school board. They recommended cutting about 100 of the approximately 900 positions at the central office, which amounted to \$7.2 million of savings for LCPS. Additional recommended cuts in central office equipment, supplies, and travel brought the total cost savings of the reorganization to \$8.5 million dollars. The final percentage of central office expenditures cut— 13 percent— far exceeded the five percent

initially authorized by the school board at the beginning of the process. In addition to firings, 70 employees were assigned different positions in the central office.

In communication with the press, managers, and rank and file central office employees, Myer stressed that the rationale driving the cuts was purely functional. A question and answer document circulated to everyone in the central office stated “it's important to note that this reorganization is, by no means, punitive or performance-related. It is entirely function-related.” When I asked Myer if he would have made the cuts if he had instead been granted the same amount of funds to channel to schools, he dismissed the question and reiterated his public justification for the firings, responding:

Well, if a frog had wings, he wouldn't bump his ass on the rocks as he flew through the water... I asked for the authority on the determination that this was the plan that we needed... And you know, even the two recalcitrant [school board] members were initially supporting the reallocation precisely because it is very difficult to argue with the notion that we should be amplifying the resource base for schools, and they understood that it was not a pie that was infinite, but rather that that would require the cut... If you're focused on the education of children that takes place in the classroom, you need to see that resources are reallocated to schools and classrooms rather than remaining in a central office. It was pretty clear to me that the central office had taken care of itself over these previous years: they built up their staff way beyond what, in my mind, the proper support system ought to look like. So you had a fat central office and very lean budgets at the schools themselves. Well, if you're going to reallocate money from the central office to the schools, that necessarily involves cutting people. And that obviously is a real flashpoint.

Interviewees with insight into the reorganization process disputed the purely functional basis for the firings. First, Davis (who served on the reorganization task force) told me that, despite Myer's charge to focus on restructuring the office for teaching and learning, the President of Instruction did not substantially contribute to the process of deciding that structure. Davis explained that:

[Rossini] was supposedly this curriculum person, but he was never there. He was always [on the East Coast] and he was never there. So they were trying to build an organization around a man who only came every couple of weeks. So he didn't know anything.

Second, Davis told me that, despite what the office's talking points asserted, many firings were rationalized based on central office employees' performance and their interpersonal interactions with those on the task force. In conversations, members of the task force decided that "some of the old guard needed to go." Factors other than function often guided firing determinations, as Davis explained:

Some of the people [Myer] was now counting on were being petty and getting rid of people because they didn't like them... I remember when [one person] was cut because somebody said somebody else in the department didn't like him and that person had been rude to them so they were getting rid of him. I remember saying "be careful, folks. Some of this stuff is going to come back to bite you, if all you're doing is judging people because they weren't nice to you."

Third, not all of the firings appear to have been as intentional as suggested by Myer. Wilkinson, who was initially included in the terminations, was eventually rehired. As she worked with her managers to get her job back, she learned how the reorganization plan had been rushed

in its final stretch by senior-level central office management, leading to her being fired without her managers even knowing:

The managers had meetings and they figured how they were going to tighten their budgets to meet the cut percentage. It went up to the [task force], got analyzed with everybody else's and we thought everything was good. We were able to handle it with a minor move here, get rid of this vacant position, this half position. You know, they just made it so that it had this little impact on their functioning as possible. And the night before [the announcement of firings to managers], it was moving ahead. Everybody was feeling good. Managers were fine. And apparently, the superintendent's office folks met and did an extra two and a half to three percent. And the way they did it was just taking your list of people and just arbitrarily scratching some positions.

The perception that the firings were not purely about function was common among rank and file central office staff. Brown told me that "some really good seasoned people" in her department lost their jobs. She told me she remembered wondering who certain fired staff members "pissed off." Wilkinson explained that staff in her department were particularly confused because those who were fired "were not politicos... up at the main building causing problems," but were just people "doing the work and just trying to get it done."

For several central office staffers I spoke with, the reorganization mainly had the effect of leaving departments in the central office "broken." Brown told me "I never did figure out how [the firings] benefited anybody." She explained that when positions were cut, she expected Myer to install new, politically-connected staffers to fulfill fired employees' responsibilities. But, from her perspective, Myer "didn't fill the jobs with something better." Two months after the firings were announced, the teachers' union newsletter published an anonymous note from a central

office staffer stating “morale here is at an all time low.” The firings— another instance of Myer’s strong-armed approach— appeared to have spurred more bitterness in the office than it built consensus around the downsizing’s supposed motivation of supporting teaching and learning.

In reflection on the firings, Myer has no regrets. From his perspective, the reorganization was necessary to free up resources for classrooms and such a move was inevitably going to be poorly received by the central office. He explained to me:

There's no way to tell someone that they're losing their job and to go into a meeting and expect that they're going to come out agreeing with you. We spent a lot of time explaining what the educational program was and what the overall objective of the reform was. But again, for those who were affected directly and dramatically by it, I understand why they are not going to support it. There's no easy way to effect change, particularly in a school district and... I'm happy to listen to the complaints and hopefully responded to those where I thought there was merit. But the notion that you can achieve change and keep everyone happy is an illusion.

While Myer outwardly explained his downsizing of the central office as an entirely operational, cost-saving measure, many of the central office staffers affected by it saw the move differently. Instead of viewing the firings as having a purely functional basis, these staffers saw the downsizing as a political and its impact on operations not being sufficiently thought out.

D. Outcomes

Months after the central office downsizing, Myer used his restructured central office to launch a series of district-wide reforms focused on increasing literacy in LCPS. He called it the “Game Plan for Student Success.” The specific reforms included enforcing carved-out time for

reading throughout the school day and during the summer as well as sending central office-based teaching coaches to schools to teach teachers how to teach reading and writing. According to polling conducted by a research organization hired by LCPS, the Game Plan was controversial. A majority of teachers in LCPS opposed core aspects of the plan and community groups were split on whether the reforms truly helped the students most in need of support.

The results of the reforms were mixed. A local think tank conducted a comprehensive quantitative study on the Game Plan in the years immediately following its implementation. Overall, they found that the reforms worked in lower grades and did not work in high school. Some policies, like summer school and before-and-after-school reading time did not meaningfully change student achievement. The most effective policy was longer English classes for middle schoolers who read below grade level, which led to meaningfully higher reading scores on a state exam. But the Game Plan's prescription for high schoolers to take multiple English classes actually led to a net decline in reading scores.

Approximately five years into Myer's tenure, the LCPS teacher's union submitted a 40,000 signature petition to the school board demanding that the district fire Myer and cease the implementation of his reform policies. Supporters of Myer conceded to the local news that controversy surrounding the superintendent was distracting from his agenda. A few months later, the school board voted to buy Myer out of his contract a year before it was set to expire, effectively firing him. Myer's abrasive leadership style— which earned him enemies but some argue was necessary to realize his reform vision— had finally caught up to him.

Five years after his term ended, a local news outlet declared that LCPS was still in a “[Myer] hangover.” Myer's name was invoked by some politicians, school board members, and community groups in discussions of how LCPS should not approach certain reforms.

Lindenwood City's business community expressed public wariness about getting re-involved in school board politics. By the mid-2010s, the LCPS central office structure was unrecognizable from what Myer had built years prior, with the restoration of area superintendents, abolition of the major operating branch model and the Center for Learning, and a return to about a dozen divisions reporting directly to the superintendent. The most notable enduring structure built by Myer in the central office is the chief of staff role, which remains a position in LCPS today.

Nationally, however, Myer became a martyr for the education reform movement. Myer came to symbolize one way superintendents could push through resistance and implement change quickly, even if at a political cost. Multiple authors wrote books on Myer's tenure valorizing the former superintendent as a change agent. Several of these books let Myer write a foreword or conclusion. A major news channel glowingly profiled Myer as part of a series on education reform. To this day, education researchers are still publishing scholarship on the district under Myer's leadership.

VI. Conclusion

Understanding how a real central office operates and responds to reform is valuable in itself, even if not every step of the office's hiring process, structure, or other specific aspects of the office is generalizable. Still, we can take at least three important lessons from the case study of Myer and LCPS.

First, the structure of a central office itself has meaning. How a central office is organized reflects its architect's values and vision for the role of the bureaucracy, which, in turn, affects how those working within the bureaucracy understand their role. Prior to Myer, the combination of decentralization of most parts of the LCPS central office and centralization of core

administrative functions reflected a regionalized theory of school district administration that central office employees bought into— ultimately breeding feudal dynamics and power brokers within the office. When Myer was appointed, he wanted the central office to reflect his reform vision of total focus on instruction. He restructured the central office to itself symbolize LCPS's new commitment to supporting classrooms, in part, to spur those working in the central office to better see themselves as directly aiding teaching and learning.

Second, at least in the short term, hardline reform strategies do not appear effective at building consensus within central offices. Myer believed that an aggressive approach was sometimes necessary to compel central office bureaucrats to carry out his reform agenda. The rank and file central office staff I spoke with (particularly those who were on the direct end of these forceful tactics) characterized Myer's hardline strategies as intimidation and resented them. Instead of Myer's threats prodding central office staff to accept and internalize Myer's reform agenda, the coercive tactics appeared to mostly have lowered morale. It is unclear whether Myer's tactics were actually effective at compelling the central office staff to actually carry out his reforms, but they certainly do not appear to have been successful at building consensus in the office around the reforms. However, even if Myer's aggressive tactics were necessary to prompt staff to do their part in executing his vision, the lack of buy-in in the long-term meant that his reforms were quickly dismantled when Myer was no longer superintendent.

Third, reforms within the central office can be understood very differently by the new superintendent instituting the changes and the staff that are directly affected by them. Throughout the case study, I was surprised by just how different Myer's account of his changes was from the central office staff I spoke with. This divergence was particularly wide in the context of Myer's firings at the central office— which he insisted was a purely functional, cost-

saving measure and central office staff perceived as a political and symbolic move that actually had little thought put into its effect on central office operations. I was only able to recognize this gap in understanding between Myer and his central office staff by actually speaking with those employees— whose voices are rarely directly shared in scholars’ case studies of superintendents. The surprising disparity in this case between the superintendent and staff’s accounts should prompt critical reflection and reexamination of other studies that exclusively center the superintendent’s narrative and neglect to share the perspective of central office workers.

In 2017, I served as an elected member of the board of education for a large suburban school district in Maryland. It was my time on that board where I first came to understand the importance of school district central offices. Many of the career bureaucrats working in the central office were incredibly hardworking, dedicated public servants. But many others— from rank and file staff to senior managers— reflected the most frustrating qualities of bureaucracies: unresponsive, unhurried, and averse to change. When the superintendent and the board privately discussed reforms, the central office was invoked as a power player. To see a reform through, the democratically elected leaders of our school district and our appointed chief needed to bargain with our own central office employees to get them to voluntarily carry out our directives. The bureaucracy itself had authority. Over decades, school board members and superintendents would come and go, but central office staff stayed— accumulating experience, connections, and de facto power over the school district. My experience on the board of education left me with a negative impression of school district central offices. I understood the importance of these bureaucracies as instruments of district-wide reform. But, as they are currently constituted, I

bought into the view that central offices were too often a “blob” of “people... dedicated to protecting established programs and keeping things just the way they are.”⁵⁵

I brought this bias into this capstone and this case study. In Lindenwood City, I expected to find central office employees firmly committed to the status quo who actively resisted and fought back against a reform superintendent’s impatient vision for change. Indeed, many other scholars, authors, and journalists glowingly paint Myer as a crusader of reform against a recalcitrant education establishment. But the story of LCPS in the first year of Myer’s term is far more complicated. Instead of finding a strict reformer/resistor dichotomy, I talked to hardworking public servants on all sides, who all believed they were doing the right thing. My analysis benefited greatly from speaking to actual rank and central office staff who directly experienced Myer’s reforms to the LCPS bureaucracy. Their voices have painted a richer, fuller, and knottier picture of Myer’s approach to the central office.

For the responsibility and power they hold over education reform, central offices deserve far more scholarly analysis. After all, what is the point of all of our discussion of change in education if it doesn’t happen? This question has driven me in education studies and sits at the heart of what this capstone seeks to explore. We have access to a wealth of incredible, data-driven ideas on how to improve American education. But the story of public schools in the last century has proven that ideas are not enough: deliberate, intentional, and thorough thought must be paid to the execution of those ideas. Understanding the dynamics of school system central offices as bureaucracies is a part of that needed study. Hopefully, this capstone can be helpful for anyone interested in how district-wide change can truly be achieved in school systems— an

⁵⁵ Jr Chester E. Finn, Jr John T. E. Cribb, and William J. Bennett, *The Educated Child: A Parents Guide From Preschool Through Eighth Grade* (Free Press, 1999), 628.

imperative that runs directly through central office bureaucracies and the employees who work in them.