FROM BYSTANDER TO ALLY

Transforming the District Human Resources Department

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center on ⁝reinventing⁝ public education

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"You can't fix test scores if you can't get teachers in the classroom."

School District Administrator

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Although policymakers and academics tend to overlook the behind-the-scenes role that district human resources (HR) departments play in education, the HR office's effect is far from small. HR departments determine whether qualified teacher candidates make it to the classroom, or slip through the cracks. They can help principals find teachers who meet their school's particular needs, or they can offer only perfunctory administrative support during the hiring process. The old adage that "the devil is in the details" is as true in school reform as it is elsewhere. One of the important details is the back-office support provided by district human resource offices.

This report sheds some light on how today's school districts are rethinking this critical district function. It provides an introductory look at the issues surrounding HR reform by considering three districts that are actively engaged in reshaping their HR offices: Houston Independent School District, Milwaukee Public Schools, and San Diego City Schools. To varying degree, each of these districts was in transition from a bureaucratic to a more performance-oriented approach to education, and had found that its HR office was not providing schools with the support they needed.

Based on 49 interviews with district and school personnel during the 2002-03 school year, the report's aim is to identify some key issues that leaders in districts elsewhere can use to begin thinking about how they might make their HR office more efficient or effective. Conclusions about the overall impact of HR reforms on teacher quality or school improvement as well as other broad generalizations about school reform and HR, however, are beyond the study's scope.

One of the report's central conclusions is that transforming the district HR function requires a combination of two things: administrative reforms to increase the department's capacity and close attention from district leaders.

Administrative reforms aimed at increasing capacity in the study districts touched on three critical areas: the skills of the people who worked in the department, the way the department was organized, and the tools it used.

- To address skill deficits, all three districts hired new departmental leaders and provided training opportunities for current department staff; all hired new staff or reassigned veterans; one used outside consultants.

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

At the same time, the study district's experiences suggest that administrative reforms alone are no guarantee of change. When superintendents and board members fail to take an interest in HR and its work, transformation efforts are haphazard and fail to stick. Leaders can "pay attention" to HR by:

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

In the end, whether or not HR is able to transform itself into a more effective organization has as much to do with the quality of leadership at the top of the district as with the management of the department. When district leaders recognize HR's importance, and think deliberately about ways to reorient their central bureaucracies to be more effective and to focus on schools' needs, they may be in a position to marshal HR as an ally that supports, rather than hinders, efforts to improve schools and teachers for all students.

Preface

The Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington's Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs undertook a study of school district human resource departments in 2002 with support from The Wallace Foundation. The study was part of a major, multi-year, multi-million dollar effort by the foundation to improve and develop new leadership for American schools. This raises the question of why an initiative on *Educational Leadership* should include a study of a central office administrative department.

Part of the answer lies in the complicated picture that emerged from other Wallace-funded leadership studies at the Center. Our earlier work on super-intendents and principals suggests that leading school systems is as much about handling politics and competing interests as it is about understanding educational issues. When it comes to politics and interests, our studies suggest that the district central office, though generally ignored in the educational leadership literature, is the proverbial 800-pound gorilla. It is a force whose activity or inertia often determines what district leaders are able to accomplish. The permanent bureaucracy is not always the neutral civil service support structure it was designed to be.

To learn more about this mostly overlooked player in public education, we investigated what happens when districts try to reform one of the central office's most important functions: human resource (HR) management. Our aim was to move beyond complaints that the central office is a constraint on leaders or a drag on the system, and to consider what its active transformation might involve. The result is a complex "necessary-but-not-sufficient" story. Transforming central office human resource departments into a more efficient and effective part of district operations depends as much on active leadership from superintendents (and school boards) as it does on changing bureaucratic routines.

Although district central office departments like HR are often in the back-ground when we talk about leaders and education, they should not be. Without focused leadership to direct, support, and sustain them, central offices will be, at best, bystanders in efforts to improve public education, and, at worst, immovable barriers. One of the implications of this report is that other central office functions (facilities management and curriculum, for example) should be similarly studied, both better to understand their influence and to suggest how they can become contributors, not impedi-ments to school improvement.

The research reported here is one of six studies supported through a Wallace Foundation grant to the Center. *From Bystander to Ally* restricts itself to the transformation of district HR offices. Other reports from the Center are devoted to the job of the school principal and school superintendent, principal shortages, new standards for principal licensure, and community capacity for school district reform.

Paul Hill, Director

Center on Reinventing Public Education

Introduction

In the summer of 2001, the staff of Houston Independent School District's human resource (HR) department was scrambling to hire teachers. At the time, anxiety about a pending national teacher shortage crisis was still high, and Houston's HR director, like her counterparts elsewhere, approached the hiring season with a sense of urgency. She told her staff, "If a teacher walks through our door, she can't leave without talking to someone who can answer her questions."

To see if her message got through, the director used an old retailers' trick: she sent in a secret shopper. "We had someone come in who was a certified special education teacher but not teaching—he was really in the city visiting a friend," she explained, "and we arranged for him to come to the front door and go through the process." The secret shopper's report was discouraging. Despite being certified in a hard-to-staff subject, he was lost in the bureaucratic shuffle and left the office as he came, unnoticed.

Today's policy debates about teachers tend to focus on *No Child Left Behind's* call for highly qualified teachers, or on disputes over current teacher certification and training requirements.[1] The behind-the-scenes work of school district HR departments, by contrast, is rarely part of the discussion. And yet as Houston's secret shopper experience suggests, questions of teacher quality and quantity are very much contingent on what happens in HR. HR departments play a role in recruiting, selecting, and hiring teachers; they help principals evaluate employee performance; they administer benefits. Although policymakers and academics tend to gloss over the role HR departments play in determining who ends up in the classroom,[2] the HR office's

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[1] For polar views on the certification debate, see Linda Darling-Hammond, "The Research and the Rhetoric on Teacher Certification: A Response to "Teacher Certification Reconsidered"," (Washington, D.C.: National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2001) and Kate Walsh, "Teacher Certification Reconsidered: Stumbling for Quality," (Baltimore, MD: The Abell Foundation, 2001). Despite disputes over the value of teacher certification requirements and over definitions of teacher quality, there is a general consensus that the most important thing schools can do for student achievement is to provide good teachers. See Dan Goldhaber, Dominic Brewer, and Deborah Anderson, "A Three-Way Error Components Analysis of Educational Productivity," *Education Economics* 7, no. 3 (1999) and Steven Rivin, Erik Hanushek, and John Kain, "Teachers, Schools, and Academic Achievement," (Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Economics Research, 2001). Beyond their critical role in student achievement, teachers are of interest because they represent a big financial investment—totaling over $360 billion nationally in 1999-2000. See Jennifer Rice King, "Teacher Quality: Understanding the Effectiveness of Teacher Attributes" (Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute, 2003).

[2] The tendency to overlook departments like HR is not unique to education; public bureaucracy is often the neglected side of the story. See Terry Moe, "Political Institutions: The Neglected Side of the Story," *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 6, Special Issue (1990). Elsewhere, Moe notes that bureaucracies are often characterized as "black boxes that mysteriously mediate between interests and outcomes. The implicit claim is that institutions do not matter much." Quoted in Donald Kettl, *The Transformation of Governance: Public Administration for Twenty-First Century America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). p. 89.

effect should not be underestimated. It is far from neutral.

Recent studies of school and district-level leadership conducted by the Center on Reinventing Public Education as part of The Wallace Foundation's *Education Leadership* program, for example, suggest how district HR offices can make it harder for leaders to meet their schools' needs.[3] The Center's study of school principals — *Making Sense of Leading Schools: A Study of the School Principalship* — singles out human resource management as a critical aspect of school-level leadership, but reports that the current system makes it hard for principals to take charge of their school's human capital. When standard practices in HR frustrate principals, getting the right staff largely depends on a principal's ability to "work the system." [4] Another Center report, *A Matter of Definition: Is There Truly a Shortage of School Principals?*, describes how HR departments can be out of step with the aims of district leaders, pointing to a "serious gap … between what superintendents say they want in new principals and the experiences human resource departments rely on to screen candidates."[5] Superintendents in the study said they wanted principal candidates with leadership ability while their HR offices looked for candidates with teaching experience. A third Wallace-funded Center report, while not addressing district HR directly, raises troubling issues about the district central office in general. *An Impossible Job? The View from the Urban Superintendent's Chair* argues that central offices "contain a myriad of personal and political relationships that are often used to sabotage, delay, or dilute a superintendent's initiatives."[6]

If policy debates about teachers generally overlook HR departments and the significant role they play, district leaders and administrators have no such luxury. They have to pay attention to district HR because of the critical role that teachers play in raising student achievement.[7] HR's efficiency and effectiveness (or lack thereof) can determine whether qualified teacher candidates make it to the classroom, or slip through the cracks. As one district official in Houston observed, "You can't fix test scores if you [HR] can't get teachers in the classroom."

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[3] For other recent research on HR's effect on teacher quality, see Jessica Levin and Meredith Quinn "Missed Opportunities: How We Keep High Quality Teachers Out of Urban Classrooms," (New York, NY: The New Teacher Project, 2003).

[4] Bradley Portin, et al. "Making Sense of Leading Schools: A Study of the School Principalship," (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, September 2003). p. 21.

[5] Marguerite Roza, "A Matter of Definition: Is There Truly a Shortage of School Principals?" (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, January 2003). p. 8.

[6] Howard Fuller, et al. "An Impossible Job? The View from the Urban Superintendent's Chair," (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, July 2003). p. 17.

[7] See Goldhaber et al, 1999 and Hanushek et al, 2001.

District leaders also have to pay attention to district HR because of the changing demands placed on school principals under many district reform efforts. As principals are held more accountable for performance and instructional quality, HR offices can either actively help them find teachers who will fit their schools' particular needs and deal with those who do not, or they can offer little more than perfunctory administrative support during the hiring process, however efficient. The bottom line is, if superintendents and school board members care about teacher quality and advancing district-wide reforms, they cannot ignore the quality of their human resource departments.

The Transformation Challenge

Given HR's importance, superintendents who face an indifferent or ineffective HR have strong reasons for trying to improve it. A brief look at HR reform in the private and public sectors suggests that such an effort requires substantial change, not marginal tinkering. Indeed, reforms in the private and public sector call for nothing short of a transformation of human resource management. Private and public sector reformers demand that the HR office abandon its "preoccupation with narrow techniques and … overly enthusiastic enforcement of regulations"[8] and transform themselves into key contributors to the organization's strategic direction.

While management gurus have called for a new direction in HR for decades, the private sector's attempts to make good on a new vision of HR are still relatively recent. It was not until the 1990s, for example, that IBM radically transformed its HR operations as part of a series of broad re-engineering efforts. The payoffs for IBM were reduced costs (four years of successive annual cost reductions ranging from 8% to 30%) and increased service levels (a 90% satisfaction rating among its over 600,000 internal customers).[9]

In private sector companies like IBM, the call for HR transformation has focused on a shift in emphasis and orientation from basic administrative duties to organizational goals, from control and compliance to consultation and facilitation, from a focus on benefits administration to recruiting and hiring better talent. Whether businesses look at how HR fits with an organization's strategic plan, at HR's value as a firm resource, or at generic HR strategies and the business environments they serve best,[10] the private sector now generally assumes that HR must evolve into a strategic partner in order for businesses to succeed in competitive economic and labor market environments.

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[8] Steven Hays and Richard Kearney, "Anticipated Changes in Human Resource Management: Views from the Field," *Public Administrative Review* 61, no. 5. (2001). p. 585.

[9] "Re-engineering HR delivery at IBM," *Human Resource Management International Digest* (September/October 2002). p. 11.

[10] See Paul M. Sweircz, "Research Update: Strategic HRM," *Human Resource Planning 18*, no. 3 (1995).

With the successes of private sector HR reform, reformers have called for a parallel transformation in government. Most of the push for reform in the public sector has occurred at the federal level, with former Vice President Al Gore's National Performance Review (NPR) and the reinventing government movement of the 1990s providing perhaps the clearest calls for transformation. A report accompanying the NPR, for example, demanded "dramatic changes in the roles and responsibilities of line managers and their HRM [human resources management] advisors." HR offices, the report advised, must move from being "reactive processors of paperwork to responsive consultants and advisors."[11] As in business, the bottom lines of an improved public sector HR are responsiveness, innovation, and alignment with organizational strategy.

The difficulty for school district leaders who want to follow these leads is that, beyond the call to give principals more authority over hiring and firing and the general exhortation to increase efficiency, there are few signposts in education to guide an effort to transform HR. (Even in the private and public sectors, it is not always clear what moving HR from "compliance" to "consultation" really means.) In education, much of the information that exists about reforming HR is abstracted from real-world problems and politics, and difficult to put into practice.

The School Communities That Work initiative at Brown University's Annenberg Institute for School Reform, for example, takes its lead from the private sector. The Annenberg effort emphasizes the importance of defining expectations and goals for employees, and urges districts to think systematically about hiring incentives, reward structures, as well as transfer systems and their effects on teacher and principal quality. The appeal of such objectives is obvious. How a district would move toward them, however, is not entirely clear.[12]

At the other extreme, audits of specific districts by management consultants offer detailed, but also extremely site-specific, information about HR transformation. The message in these reports is largely the same: district HR has to move from "compliance" to "consultation," from "administrative support" toward "strategic partner."

Despite their merits, these bits and pieces do not add up to a clear understanding about district HR's role and, more importantly, how it might be reformed and improved.

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[11] See Al Gore, "Reinventing Human Resource Management, an Accompanying Report of the National Performance Review," (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Vice President, 1993). URL: http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/npr/library/reports/hrm.html

[12] School Communities That Work, "Find, Deploy, Support, and Keep the Best Teachers and School Leaders," (Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Brown University, 2001). To be fair, the Annenberg initiative is still in the process of working with several districts on transforming their human resource practices and policies, however, little specific information was available at the time this report was written.

This report provides an introductory look at three districts that are actively engaged in reshaping their HR offices: Houston Independent School District, Milwaukee Public Schools, and San Diego City Schools. It is based on 49 interviews with district and school personnel during the 2002-03 school year. Two of these districts (Houston Independent School District and San Diego City Schools) have more to show for their efforts than the third (Milwaukee Public Schools) and are noticeably farther along in their transformation of HR and more focused in their agendas. The report's aim is to identify key issues for leaders who want to begin rethinking their own HR office and its role. Conclusions about the overall impact of HR reforms on teacher quality or school improvement, as well as other broad generalizations, however, are beyond the study's scope.

This report has four main sections. The first introduces the three districts involved in the study. The second section describes key areas of administrative reform that were common across all three districts. The third section discusses the specific role district leadership played in these efforts. The fourth section highlights major themes and lessons.

Chapter 1   Three Districts and the Transformation of HR

To better understand district efforts to reform HR departments, a University of Washington research team visited the Houston Independent School District, Milwaukee Public Schools, and San Diego City Schools during the 2002-03 school year. Each district was at a different stage of *district-wide reform* during the fieldwork. Houston was more than a decade into a major push to decentralize decisionmaking and central office functions to the school level. Milwaukee, after years of turnover in the superintendent's office, had a new superintendent who was instituting a set of new priorities while working in the context of past decentralization efforts and outside competition from charters and the nation's first voucher program for low-income families. San Diego was five years into a top-down reform push that focused on high quality instruction and professional development in schools led by strong principals. In addition to their broad school-improvement efforts, all three districts were actively working to transform the personnel function in their central offices.

To learn about those efforts, researchers spent three days in each district, interviewing HR department personnel (including the department directors, managers, and staffing specialists), school principals, teachers, and executive district leadership (i.e., the superintendent or the superintendent's chief of staff and/or top level managers). To provide some context for the study's findings, this section provides a brief overview of each of the three districts, their broader reform efforts, and why the transformation of HR was on their agenda. Subsequent chapters deal with the substance of their HR reforms. Because all three of the districts have a national profile in school reform, the introductory descriptions presented here are brief.[13] See Appendix A for more on methods. For a sense of scale, Appendix B details the size and budgets for HR in each of the districts.

Houston

District-wide reform efforts. Houston's school improvement efforts have followed a single reform vision for more than 14 years. Codified in a district document called *Beliefs and Visions*, the district's reforms emphasize a commitment to decentralizing decisionmaking, a focus on performance,

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[13] For a general account of Houston's reforms, see Donald McAdams, *Fighting to Save Our Urban Schools … and Winning!* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2000). For a general account of San Diego's reforms, see Linda Darling-Hammond et al., "Building Instructional Quality: "Inside-Out" and "Outside-In" Perspectives on San Diego's School Reform," (Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, 2003). For an account of education reform in Milwaukee, see Frederick Hess' *Revolutions at the Margins*, (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2002).

support for teacher-student relationships, and a common core of academic subjects for all students. Since the early 1990s, school board majorities have consistently supported the *Beliefs and Visions* agenda and have hired three superintendents to implement it. Though Houston's decade-plus of reform has had its share of tumult, including recent controversy over the accuracy of the district's data on dropout rates, the consistency of its effort over time is rare in urban education today.[14] In 2002, Houston was awarded the first Broad Prize for Urban Education for outstanding improvement and narrowing the achievement gap.

Why transform HR? The transformation of Houston's HR department was on its agenda as part of the district's overall push to reform its central office so that it would better support principals and decentralized decisionmaking in its schools. In the mid-1990s, the district's central office reforms focused mainly on downsizing the central administration and moving personnel into schools or subdistrict offices; in 2000, however, the district turned its attention to the active reorganization of its HR department. As it stood, the HR department's inefficiencies — its services at the time were still largely paper-based, slow, and complicated — were out of step with the district's strategy of giving principals more authority, especially over hiring decisions. As one district official described the pre-reform department,

> There were people sitting on the floor filling out applications. There were principals sitting at a table with boxes of files - as a principal you don't have time to be going through files! People were sitting all over with their crying babies. You thought you were in an emergency room after a train derailment.

Houston's efforts to transform this chaotic picture into a more efficient and effective one that would better support principals were, in part, shaped by two important contextual factors that set Houston apart from Milwaukee and San Diego. First, located in a so-called "right to work" state, Houston was not constrained by collective bargaining processes while it made major personnel changes as part of its HR reform. Second, as already mentioned, the district's reform efforts benefited from a decade of stable board and superintendent leadership that sent a clear message about both the urgency and the direction of district-wide reform.

Milwaukee

District-wide reform efforts. Since the early 1990s, Milwaukee's district-wide school improvement efforts have focused on devolving what had once

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[14] See, for example, Jo Ann Zuniga, "HISD Penalty in Dropout Flat Not Sufficient, Lawmaker Says," *The Houston Chronicle*, August 9, 2003 and Diana Jean Schemo, "Questions on Data Cloud Luster of Houston Schools," *The New York Times*, July 11, 2003.

been centrally controlled decisions (e.g., decisions about hiring new teachers and allocating dollars) to schools. Competition from independent charter schools and a voucher program for low-income families has also forced the district to pay closer attention to parent desires and needs, resulting in the creation of more specialized programs at the school-level, including popular Montessori programs and full-day kindergarten for four-year olds. The district's reform agenda has, however, had a history of moving forward in fits and starts because of steady turnover among its school board members and superintendent.

In August 2002, Milwaukee hired Bill Andrekopoulos, a popular district charter school principal, to be superintendent. He is the district's eighth leader in less than 20 years. While continuing the district's general push toward decentralization, his reform agenda also includes an initiative for smaller high schools, the use of on-site literacy coaches, a reorganization of the central office, and a continued focus on effective school-level leadership.

Why transform HR? In some ways, the most significant transformation of Milwaukee's HR department may have already happened. Ten years ago the district began to move toward a school-based hiring system as part of its decentralization agenda; what started as a pilot program is now the norm in the district. As a union official described it:

> *In the old days HR would do the staffing on paper and there were only two factors: licensure and seniority. We [the union] would do it on paper and then we would mesh the systems. Then we'd go back and forth and argue out all of the changes and then the assignment notices would go out. And it took both sides almost the whole summer to do the staffing. It was all in our office and their office. With the system we have now everything is shifted to the schools.*

With the shift of hiring responsibility to the schools, the HR department gained new responsibilities to support and manage the school-based interview process. These responsibilities included providing training for school-based interview teams, developing all of the forms used in the process, making sure that the negotiated timelines for interviews are maintained, and monitoring licensure compliance. By the 2002-03 school year, Milwaukee's HR reforms were, however, less about its school-based hiring system and more about an impending reorganization of the central office, including changes that would affect the HR department. At the time of our fieldwork, the rationale behind these most recent structural reforms, unlike earlier school-based hiring reforms, was not readily apparent to HR or school personnel. Beyond a vague sense that the restructuring was to improve efficiency, it was unclear to people why the changes were occurring and what they were to accomplish.

Milwaukee at a glance. *Less than half the size of the Houston school district, the Milwaukee Public School system is the 28th largest in the nation. It educates almost 98,000 students at 208 schools. Its HR department employs 55 people and serves approximately 6,000 teachers and more than 12,000 district staff combined. The district's HR to teacher ratio is 1:109.*

San Diego

District-wide reform efforts. For the last five years, San Diego's school improvement efforts have followed an agenda championed by superintendent Alan Bersin and former Chancellor of Instruction, Anthony Alvarado. Called *The Blueprint for Student Success*, the district's reforms focus on intense and ongoing professional development for teachers, quality materials, more instructional time, and the empowerment of principals. The reforms also include the reorganization and downsizing of the district central office, both to free up more resources for instruction and provide better support services to schools. While San Diego's reform agenda is generally accepted as guiding the district's current direction, it has never received more than a slim majority on the school board and has been an ongoing source of tension between the district administration and the teachers union.

Why transform HR? Under its reforms, San Diego, like Houston, downsized its central office to redirect resources toward schools and classrooms (this included the elimination of over 200 positions and redistribution of over $11 million of central office expenditures directly to schools). With its reform's emphasis on instruction and professionalism and on principals as the guarantors of instructional quality, San Diego placed heavy demands on HR: the district needed an aggressive effort to recruit and retain quality teachers and its principals needed new levels of support (e.g., in weeding out weak teachers) now that they were being held responsible for the quality of instruction in their schools. The district's HR office was not up to the task. As one HR staffer remembered, "We had lots and lots of paper-intensive manual processes that really made it difficult to manage calls, to be responsive, to do a lot of the things that are so important … HR used to be like the stepchildren [in the district]" — long neglected. While San Diego's efforts to transform its HR department benefited from a coherent district-wide reform effort, as was the case in Houston, they were also shaped by tensions between the district and its teachers union over the district's broader reform effort.

In sum, the motivation for transforming HR in each district stemmed from the need to address inefficiencies—call it "red tape," "bureaucracy," or simply "the system"—that acted as roadblocks to attracting and keeping high quality teachers; in San Diego and Houston, it also stemmed from the need for a better partnership between HR and newly empowered (and increasingly accountable) principals under district-wide reforms.

Before proceeding, a common sense caveat is in order. This analysis is based on people's accounts and perceptions of their departments during the 2002-03 school year, as well as their recollections from prior years (see Appendix A for topics covered in the interview guide). Clearly the analysis is suggestive; it does not cover everything. Moreover, while informative, these districts' experiences should not be used to generalize. The Houston agenda

San Diego at a glance. As the13th largest district in the country, San Diego City Schools sits somewhere between Milwaukee and Houston in terms of size. It enrolls 141,600 students and has 182 schools. San Diego has the lowest HR personnel-to-teacher ratio of the three districts (1:83); its 91 HR employees serve about 7,500 teachers and over 17,000 total district employees.

undoubtedly enjoyed greater freedom of action than reforms in the other two sites, which had to work within union constraints. San Diego drew on the qualities of a strong, nontraditional district leader, even though he operated with razor-thin board margins. And it is possible that Andrekopoulos in Milwaukee enjoyed greater freedom of action in his "honeymoon year" precisely because high rates of turnover in prior years provided him with some protection and latitude.

Despite these caveats, Houston, Milwaukee, and San Diego provide useful snapshots of the opportunities and challenges district leaders face when they attempt to transform the district HR function. The report's next chapter describes the substance of the administrative reforms undertaken by the districts. In each case, though to varying degrees, those reforms touched on three critical aspects of the department: the skills of the people who worked there, the way they were organized, and the tools they used.

Chapter 2   Administrative Reforms in HR

Transforming skills, reorganizing work, investing in tools

In all three districts, the substance of the administrative reforms in HR touched on three critical areas: the skills of the people who worked in the department, the way it was organized, and the tools it used to manage information.[15]

New Talents and Skills

All three districts saw a need to upgrade the talents and skills of their HR personnel as part of their HR reform efforts. Weaknesses in HR capacity ranged from inadequate customer service skills among HR personnel, to outdated attitudes about work (e.g., we are "systems police"), to a lack of knowledge about information technology systems. In Houston, a district official gave a blunt characterization of the capacity gap by saying, "We knew we were putting [the data management system] PeopleSoft in place. We knew we needed new skills to make that happen. We needed HR professionals who knew how to operate [the system], and what we had was a bunch of old educators stuffed up here." In San Diego, a district official saw the need to upgrade the skills in the department because HR personnel had spent most of their careers focusing on "gate keeping, processing what came [their way] … and making sure principals didn't over hire," rather than problem solving, something they needed to do as they worked with principals under the district's broader reforms. A Milwaukee district official described having to install a new phone system and provide customer service training in order to "squelch the ability [of HR personnel] to essentially say, 'I'm not answering the phone.'" In order to deal with these problems and increase the capacity of their departments, the districts made investments on four key fronts: 1) hiring new department directors; 2) increased training for HR professionals and staff; 3) new hires and strategic internal promotions; and, 4) the use of outside consultants.

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[15] Fields outside education also identify the importance of these three elements in HR reform. For example, The National Academy of Public Administration includes a whole section on increasing HR professionals' capacity in its report, *The Case for Transforming Public-Sector Human Resources Management.* Writing about public sector HR in general, Steven Hays of the University of South Carolina points to changes in organizational structure as a way to set the stage for enhanced standards of service and more strategic alignment between HR and broader agency goals. And the Center for the Study of Social Policy, among others, has pointed to how technology can streamline and improve job application processes. In short, the areas of activity we identified in our analysis – personnel, structure, and technology – reflect aspects of the best practice literature on HR management.

New department directors

In each of these districts, improvements in HR capacity included changes at the top of the department. All three hired new department directors who brought a new level of HR expertise to the district. San Diego's and Milwaukee's directors came from other successful school district HR departments; Houston's came from a private sector executive recruiting firm and had a background in hospital HR administration.[16]

The new directors' impressive resumes signaled a departure from the reported historical practice of using the HR department as a warehouse for weak line-workers and leaders. The superintendent's chief of staff in San Diego noted that because of this, bringing in new departmental leadership "was critical [for HR reform]. Once that's brought in, you can develop a sense of team, and people are proud to say they work in HR … [In the past] when people were disciplined at a school site they were moved out and stuck down in HR." Respondents in Houston described a similar situation: in the past, "If someone burned out in the field," explained one official, "we brought them in and gave them to HR."

This history made leading change in the departments a challenge. "I'm having to change the culture, I'm having to change the skills, I'm having to change everything about it [the department]," explained San Diego's director, "and that doesn't just happen overnight." Houston's HR director explained that her attempts to transform the department required constant communication with her staff, including simply telling people what they need to do and following up on their progress. "I have to ask, 'Have you contacted so and so? What's the decision on this?' People were not accustomed to that." The picture in Milwaukee was similar. According to the director, people working in HR were "not used to the question, 'Why didn't you do the job you were supposed to do?' I want to know. I want to know where we need to build capacity."

Each district saw the need for new department leadership that would bring HR expertise to bear on a new set of expectations and challenges under reform, rather than get lost in rules and regulations. By bringing in new leadership with HR expertise, the districts were, as one Houston observer put it, able to build "credibility with the organization, with the superintendent, with the board members, and with the business community."

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[16] Interestingly, all three HR directors talked about taking their current positions because they needed a personal challenge. In their old jobs, they said, things were too smooth. As one director explained, "My people [in my previous district] were so good I could leave – that's where I started to learn about 2 week vacations because I could leave and it worked. We had the technology, we had the automation, we had everything. And actually I was getting a little bored."

Increased training for HR professionals and staff

In addition to changes at the top, all three districts provided new and increased training to develop the skills of their current HR staff. For the most part, this training touched on improving the technical skills people needed in HR. For example, personnel in San Diego began attending sessions run by the California Association of School Administrators' Personnel Institute that covered HR topics (e.g., discipline, evaluation, negotiation, teacher/classified recruitment, and the implementation of the Fair Labor Standards Act) as well as breakfasts hosted by local law firms on hot legal topics such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Family Medical Leave Act, and other key legal issues with HR ramifications.[17] In Houston, HR personnel received training to get up to speed on new technology. As in San Diego, Houston HR personnel were sent off-site for their training — to "make sure that they [HR personnel] understood how important the training was." As an HR official explained,

> You can have people come in and tell them, "You have to do this." But if you're just throwing it at them in their daily routine, it doesn't give it the importance of "Stop what you're thinking, listen, I'm going to hold you accountable for this." That makes them realize, "Gosh, this is so important that they actually took me away from my job."

Training on HR issues or new technology systems represented a fairly straightforward attempt to fill skill deficits in the departments. In a similar vein, Milwaukee provided new customer service training for its HR staff. While some of the training in HR skills was formal, some of it was, according to one HR administrator, "truly just mentoring. One-on-one dealing with what it means to be an HR person and what your responsibilities are as an HR person."

More so than in the other districts, San Diego's HR training involved paying attention to the specifics of the district's wider reform effort. As one San Diego official described it,

> [HR] staffing administrators go on walkthroughs with the [district-level] instructional leaders … They keep up with the literacy training and all of those things that are the focus of

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[17] The department also gets information from on-line newsletters. These include HRhero.com (a website that helps HR professionals find quick answers to employment-law questions) and HR Executive newsletter *www.workindex.com/hrexecutive* (which focuses on strategic issues in HR and covers both public and private sector information, including trends in employee benefits and IT information).

> *The Blueprint [for Student Success]. When we do interviews, we continue to revise [them] to reflect the things that the [reform] says are important. For example, we try to pull from candidates their knowledge of literacy and the techniques that they use that are associated with literacy.*

HR personnel in San Diego were also well versed in the reform agenda's emphasis on principals. Under the district's larger reforms, the superintendent expected principals to take a more active and strategic approach to the quality of instruction and the staffing their schools, including dealing with unproductive teachers more directly than had been the case in the past. This gave HR an important role to play as advisors for principals on discipline issues. As the HR director explained,

> *The law dealing with discipline, due process, and even the evaluation process is complex. Principals have so much on their plates on a daily basis that expecting them to keep up with the case law that changed yesterday is too much. Our plan is that HR will become their consultants and their assistants.*

New hires and strategic internal promotions

All three directors indicated that improving the capacity of HR personnel also involved bringing on new staff members as well as reassigning current staff. Having experience in the district did not, in one San Diego official's estimation, necessarily equip people for work in HR — indeed, she observed that "the higher the level of certificated administration that a person has held before coming into Human Resources, the more rigid they are and the less flexible and the more resistant to change they are" — and so, at times, she had to look outside for the capacity she needed. A Houston HR administrator noted that the department had long-time personnel who "if you brought them a piece of paper, would decide what to do with this piece of paper. But they couldn't go out there and say, 'Mr. Manager, you need ten teachers, you have to interview two hundred. You can't interview one a week, you're not going to find ten by June.' " In all three districts, HR administrators made a point to selectively hire noneducators to upgrade skills in the department and to promote high quality people within the department.

Bringing in new blood sometimes required more than simply making a hiring decision. Milwaukee's HR director, for example, explained how she had to reclassify an affirmative action officer position so that the department could hire a noneducator. "I had the position reclassified because we wanted someone with different skills … we don't just hire teachers … we have to have some HR expertise in the office." She said, "We have more teaching experience in the department than we need." Houston pursued an even more radical approach to bringing new talent into the department.

As an HR manager explained:

> *We developed new job descriptions, new positions, and did away with all the old positions, and essentially told the HR organization you had to reapply for jobs. We told people that we would select some people from within the organization but that if people didn't have the skill levels that we needed that we would certainly go outside the organization and bring in new people. And we let some people go…*

> *We looked at clerical jobs and decided to upgrade the skill level and put a minimum of Bachelor's degree requirement on those jobs. Since then, we've only hired people with degrees into these entry-level positions. They have degrees in HR, they have business degrees, and they have a background that would help us improve what we were doing.*

Another administrator in Houston argued, "We couldn't have done it [transformed HR] without clearing the decks … You know who's gonna dig their heels in. You know who they are. Those are the ones that need to go."

In addition to new hires, the directors talked about the need to strategically move existing personnel within the department. San Diego, for example, tapped internal talent in order to help HR deal with the district's challenging relationship with its teachers union. The department created a new position to focus on labor relations and filled it with a former union representative and long-time district employee. This person's role was in part to help the HR department "push the contract" in order to give schools more control over the teacher transfer process (the department was trying to suggest that contract language about transfers being "deemed qualified" did not necessarily mean that seniority was the top criteria for teacher transfers).

In the end, the districts' experiences suggest that transforming central office personnel is a question of finding the right balance between old and new blood. A Houston administrator in the information technology unit explained the benefits of mixing new hires with long-time employees:

> *As we bring in new people with new ideas and thoughts, they mix with the veterans and then we've got some synergy going because you have a seasoned team of highly skilled new people, new thinkers, along with [veterans] who've been there but can still say, "I'm looking forward to adopting this new stuff."*

Consultants

While all three districts invested in new talent and training to increase HR capacity, Houston used outside consultants to a degree not seen in the other

two cities. One Houston official went so far as to say that "the change on the staff has been driven by consultants." She called them the "invisible X factor" behind the district's successful transformation efforts, both in HR and, more generally, in the central office.

Part of Houston's transformation strategy was to pair consultants with top internal people and keep them together as a team through the planning and implementation of new programs or projects. Its new web portal which included HR links, for example, was "run by five consultants and about five of our own IT people … we looked at the group and we said, 'The one with the most smarts who knows us best is one of the consultants,' so he's now in charge."

According to district officials, their colleagues in other districts are reluctant to involve outsiders in planning and operations, despite what Houston officials see as the advantages of using consultants. This reluctance is, in the eyes of Houston's business manager, a serious mistake:

> We've introduced [one our top consultants] to probably a dozen districts. All of them said, "No thanks, we can do it ourselves." But when they believe that they can do it themselves, they're dead. They cannot do it themselves — and superintendents are usually the worst.

New Organizational Structures

In addition to making investments in the talents and skills of HR personnel, all three districts reorganized the structure of their HR departments as part of their reform efforts. This reorganization took place on two levels: 1) individual jobs in the department were redesigned; and 2) the department's overall standing in the central office hierarchy shifted. The scope and nature of these changes were not uniform across the districts. Houston and San Diego modified individual jobs in a way that Milwaukee did not. And although all three districts altered their HR department's standing in the central office hierarchy, the details of that change differed.

Redesigned jobs in the department

As principals faced new expectations and responsibilities in San Diego and Houston, the districts saw a need to rethink how they organized work in their HR departments in order to support them as on-site leaders. In the past, principals had to talk to a cavalcade of HR department employees when it came time to fill vacant positions. A Houston principal explained that when he needed to hire a custodian in the past, he had seek out one HR contact; when he needed a clerical hire, he had to talk to someone else; and so on, from teachers to paraprofessionals. Even single hires typically involved a host

of HR staffers. An HR staffer with a long history in Houston remembered how "everybody [in HR] had his or her small job … it was an assembly line. You signed off on your piece of paper and you passed it on." By the time a dossier made it to the filing room, "you had 12 signatures on it."

In order to streamline this labyrinthine system to better support HR decisions at the school level, Houston and San Diego took HR duties previously handled by multiple jobs in the department and assigned them a newly created position, the HR generalist.[18] This move to generalists fundamentally changed the way schools in both districts interacted with HR. For the first time, they had a single point of contact in HR. District officials in both cities spoke about the goal of this restructuring in the same terms — it was designed to provide "one-stop-shopping" for schools as they interacted with the HR department.[19]

Under the new structure, individual HR generalists (along with support staff) serve a specific set of schools. Houston's generalists, for example, serve schools grouped according to the district's subdistricts; this puts a single generalist in charge of a base of about 3,000 employees (the district has ten generalist positions). When the generalist positions were created, Houston assigned recruiting responsibilities that had previously been part of the old "staffing specialist" job to three new, stand-alone recruiter positions.

San Diego's consolidation of HR services followed a similar logic. Like Houston, San Diego took some specialist jobs in HR (e.g., discrimination complaint inspector) and replaced them with generalist positions that had the main responsibility of working with a specific set of schools on teacher hiring. Unlike Houston, however, San Diego continues to require schools to make different contacts in HR when dealing with certified employment (e.g., teachers) and classified employment (e.g., secretaries, maintenance). While a ranking HR official in San Diego hoped that "someday we can merge it and really and truly be a one-stop shop," to a degree *de facto* one-stop shopping was already occurring, with some principals treating their certificated contacts as key contacts on all HR issues. New principals especially, explained an HR administrator, may "not be sure about much, but they do know their certificated staffing administrator [i.e., generalist]. So even if they have a classified problem, they can always call them and then they'll make the connection and get it resolved by pulling in the classified resource."

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[18] "HR generalist" is Houston's term for the position. San Diego referred to these positions as "staffing administrators." We use the word "generalist" in reference to both districts. In both cases the departments had *multiple* generalists, each responsible for serving a specific group of schools.

[19] Steven Hays, of the University of South Carolina, points to how such "jacks-of-all-trades" can enhance service quality in his Appendix to the report, "Improving the Quality of Human Services through Results-Oriented Human Resource Management," (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2002).

HR personnel in Houston explained that the move to generalists allowed them to see "the [staffing] process from start to finish, and to solve problems much more quickly [than before]." From the school perspective, having one HR contact makes staffing easier "because that person [the generalist] gets to know my school and my needs," a San Diego principal said. According to respondents in both districts, these two characteristics of the generalist structure — having HR professionals who manage the staffing process from start to finish and who have close relationships with individual schools — have changed the dynamic between the schools and HR. A Houston HR generalist noted that "now we're the first call [principals make] if they have a problem or a question … 'Call your generalist.' It's been a complete 180. We used to be the roadblock and now we're there to assist." Another HR manager in Houston talked about an attitude shift in HR under the structure:

> *Now, we don't tell principals we can't. We find out first and then we make sure if it really will be a "No." We never tell them we're too busy. We just don't because that's what they used to hear before.*

In strikingly similar terms, HR personnel in both districts emphasized that the idea was to have HR help principals solve problems, rather than just making sure they followed the rules. The goal, according to one Houston official, is for HR personnel to help principals "define what it is you [the principal] need to do to be able to accomplish what you want,' as opposed to just saying, 'No, you can't do that.'" A generalist in San Diego agreed, explaining how she now says to principals, "'Okay, let's stop a minute and step back. Tell me where you're trying to get and let me see if I can try to help you get there.'… Maybe Mary Sue can't work those two extra hours, but tell me what it is you need."

In addition to improving the relationship between HR and principals, the generalist positions also helped to clarify accountability within the central office. By assigning generalists to specific schools, the districts left no question about which HR employees were responsible for meeting which schools' staffing needs. A district administrator in Houston went so far as to publicly post school-by-school hiring results, creating an informal competition among generalists that "went through the roof" in a year when the district needed to hire an additional 850 teachers. District reports that summarize performance in Houston's various business service divisions (e.g., human resources, facilities management operations, transportation) also include hiring results by subdistrict and generalist measured against that year's goals. Equally important, when schools have complaints about HR, it is easier to know where to go to help sort out the problem.

Shifted standing in the central office hierarchy

HR reforms in all three districts also included altering their HR departments' status within the district's organizational chart. The changes were different in each district, as the "boxes" for HR in the organizational chart were moved about and new lines of oversight and responsibility were established. San Diego's HR box moved up in the district hierarchy, Houston's moved down, and Milwaukee's gained a new connection with another department.

Moving up in San Diego. In San Diego, the HR department moved up in the central office hierarchy. Instead of being housed under the district's business and operations division, the HR department was moved directly under the office of the superintendent. As a result, the HR director joined the district's executive committee, garnering both direct access to the superintendent and a boost in status. Moving out from under business services also gained the department more independence and, in the opinion of an HR official, integrity, as they managed the restructuring and downsizing of other central office departments.

Moving up in Houston by moving down. Houston's HR department took a step down in the district's organizational chart, moving from the office of the superintendent to the district's business services division (this was exactly the opposite of HR's move in San Diego). On closer examination, however, this was a move up: HR gained a commanding champion in its new supervisor, the district's business services director. An additional and subtler level of restructuring was also at work in Houston as the district engaged HR personnel in cross-functional, project-specific collaboration with other central office departments. Getting the HR leadership involved in problem solving for other departments has reportedly led to cross-fertilization and better connections across various departments in the central office.

Taking on more duties in Milwaukee. In Milwaukee, restructuring occurred less in terms of the department's relative status and more in terms of its lateral connections to other central office divisions—in short, the HR "box" on Milwaukee's organizational chart grew more spokes. At the center of the restructuring was the grouping of the HR department and the district's educational accountability division under one unit—a new Office of Admin-istrative Services—to be headed by the HR Director. In the HR director's new capacity she would become the district's Chief Administrative Officer. This change was one of many the superintendent made in the central office to promote efficiency. Perhaps because this was a new change at the time of our interviews, HR staffers were cautious in their opinions about it—some feared it would spread the department head too thin.

The motivation for these shifts was clearer in Houston and San Diego than it was in Milwaukee. In the case of Houston and San Diego, nominally dif-ferent movements in the district superstructure had the same effect: the HR department gained profile and power. (In part, this gain in status sent

a signal that HR would no longer be a repository for people who had failed elsewhere in the district, a characterization of pre-reform HR made by respondents in both districts.) As an HR official in Houston explained, "When we call a [subdistrict] superintendent now, they quickly come to find out why and how and what."

Even more important, this rise in status gave each department a "seat at the table" that included direct access to top decision makers and put it in a position to better align its strategies with broad district reform goals and strategy.[20] One sign of HR's increased importance in Houston is its involvement in the reorganization of other central office departments. A district official explained that "once they [other central office departments] got their reorganization set, the superintendent said, 'When they start meeting with their employees I want an HR person there.' That would've been unheard of five years ago … [now] the users, the client base, see us as a partner, not a stumbling block."

As already mentioned, a ranking official in San Diego offered an additional explanation for why the department moved up in the district hierarchy: to protect its integrity. Given her experience, she believed HR departments need to report directly to superintendents to avoid being compromised. If HR operates under business services, she argued, it has "no independence to say, 'You [the supervising department] have to follow the rules like everybody else." If HR operates under the superintendent, the "playing field is leveled," and no division or department can request tasks from HR that they are not charged by the superintendent to do.

Unlike Houston and San Diego, where structural change was a *fait accompli*, Milwaukee's restructuring efforts were in the early stages during the time of our site visit. The changes appear to be less a directive for HR than a move to consolidate the central office structure. According to the superintendent, the district has to "learn to work smarter, work more effectively … People in your top positions have to be able to multi-task and take on more responsibility." At such an early stage in the restructuring process, it was difficult for other respondents to articulate both the order of and purpose for the changes that placed HR under the new Administrative Services division headed by the HR director. In many ways, HR reform in Milwaukee was a promise yet to be realized, built on a strategy yet to be understood, an issue that will receive additional attention in Chapter 3.

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[20] As a National Academy of Public Administration report on HR transformation puts it, "…it is critical that HR officials are active players in the establishment and implementation of strategic plans so that HR is a key element of the plan." It stands to reason that HR would more likely be accepted as a strategic player when it has access to key decision makers. See "The Case for Transforming Public-Sector Resources Management," (Washington, DC: National Academy of Public Administration,2000) p. 14.

New Technology

As the districts worked to both improve the efficiency of their HR offices in general and support decentralized decisionmaking in particular, investing in information technology became a critical aspect of their reforms in HR. All three directors talked about the need to provide everyone in the system — HR personnel, school leaders, teachers, other district employees, and job applicants — with faster and easier access to important information (about job openings, benefits, and the like). A before-and-after story in Houston exemplifies the benefit of new technology for the district's principals. Before enjoying desktop access to the resumes of job candidates, one principal remembered, the HR department would "set up tables in the summer and there would always be five or six principals or their assistant principals here going through files." With the new system, "Everyone in the district sees all the resumes and has access to them on-line." Principals can now "go in, see who's applied for open jobs, look at their resumes, make a hire, and it goes directly into PeopleSoft."

But even as the directors spoke of investments in technology as a key component in improving the performance of their departments, their experiences were far from uniform.

Milwaukee had invested in a human resource data management system years before Houston or San Diego. At the time of the site visit for this study, however, this system was fragmented and in need of an upgrade. Part of the reason for the incomplete implementation of the system was that some in the HR rank-and-file had never bought into it in the first place. "We found out that one of the reasons that we couldn't process our work is when we changed to PeopleSoft, people 'did it' but they actually held on to their old processes," explained one department official. Despite having invested in a widely used, commercial HR information system, the department still relied on "homemade software … [that] has everything in it: when a person starts, when they quit." This homegrown application was, "just a database and spreadsheet ... We have PeopleSoft, which really has the capacity to do all of that, but it's far more complex."

Houston's investments in technology have had a farther reach. The district created a web portal that offers teachers, principals, and other central office managers tailored information via the web. One district official praised the virtues of the portal, saying it contained "all the tools you need: PeopleSoft, SAP [the district's financial system], your student system, your data disaggregation tool where you can look at tests sliced, diced, every which way you want … So, what we've said is technology was just to get the desk organized. Now, what real work can we do?" Houston's technology investments have also helped streamline how HR manages the district's payroll. As its chief financial officer remembered, "We were having so many people with payroll problems because of our paper system. We would get

3,000-4,000 calls a payday from people with problems getting paid. Granted, we have 30,000 employees, but that's still a lot of calls." With the advent of its on-line payroll system (there are now no physical pay stubs), complaints reportedly number less than 100. Finally, new access to data has allowed HR personnel to examine the productivity of recruitment trips. The HR director explained,

> [We can now ask] how many of those teachers are we keeping? Do they even come? And if they come, how long do they stay? Is it even worth the $25,000 that we're spending to go all over the United States if it's just the homegrown people that we keep?

San Diego was on the cusp of upgrading its information technology system at the time of the site visit. For the first time, dollars were being invested up front for technology in HR (as in Houston and Milwaukee, the department was putting PeopleSoft's system in place). As one HR staffer said, "[Before] it took us forever to get any kind of technology, any kind of updated computers." A self-proclaimed "technology freak," the department's director said that she wanted new technology for the department "now." Respondents expressed hope that new data management capacity would help rationalize and modernize the flow of information to and from the department. Some expected that improved data management would allow them to provide better and more personalized attention to schools and job candidates.

Of the three districts, Houston had gone the farthest in harnessing the forces of information technology. Speaking from that experience, officials there suggested that new technology is especially useful for HR if it has three characteristics. First, it should allow HR to integrate multiple streams of data (e.g., from financial *and* personnel systems). Second, it should automatically produce reports on relevant measures without requiring manual calculations. Third, it should provide self-serve options for employees. On this last point, an HR official explained, "If we had 3,000 employees it'd be different, having people come in here and changing their addresses and stuff. But when you have as many as we have, and our city is so wide, the geographic area that the district covers is just huge, [without automated self-service] it could take an employee an hour to get down here and take care of something."

Summary

In order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their HR departments, the districts had to rethink the skills of the people who worked in HR, the way the department was organized, and the tools it used to manage information. Their reforms involved bringing new talents and skills, new organizational structures, and new technology into HR:

- <u>New talents and skills:</u> To address skill deficits, all three districts hired new departmental leaders and provided training opportunities for current department staff; all hired new staff or reassigned veterans; and one used outside consultants.
- <u>New organizational structures:</u> To provide schools with more streamlined HR contacts, two of the districts redesigned jobs in the department and all three districts changed the department's standing within the district hierarchy.
- <u>New technology:</u> To improve the flow of information within the department and between the department and schools, all three districts made investments in information technology.

While these administrative reforms provide a useful outline of the areas of activity that can be involved in the transformation of district HR, they are only part of the story. As the next chapter suggests, a fourth factor, district leadership, helps to explain whether or not these changes are likely to develop, or have the desired effect.

Chapter 3   The District Leader's Role

In each district, efforts to transform HR were not simply a matter of administrative reform. They depended on active leadership from superintendents (and school boards) as much as they did on changing bureaucratic routines or new organizational structures. This chapter looks at the role district leadership played in the districts' efforts to improve HR.

The district level leadership in the three districts represented a range of stability and coherence. Houston has had a stable school board and reform strategy for more than a decade and a succession of supportive superintendents. San Diego has followed the same reform agenda for five years under the same superintendent, but its school board has been chronically divided and its teachers union has openly opposed its reform. Milwaukee's school board and superintendency have experienced constant turnover in the last decade. This variety makes the three districts a useful set for highlighting the role district leadership played in efforts to transform HR. Here, we focus on the two extremes: Houston and Milwaukee.

Houston

Houston's superintendent (Rod Paige, at the time of many of the developments discussed here, but already U.S. Secretary of Education during this study) played an important role in bringing structural changes to its HR department. When the department's former director balked at making painful cuts in personnel as part of the move to HR generalists, the superintendent replaced him. "One of the gifts the superintendent gave us," remembered a district official, "was that he removed the former director. It was really about courage." Without this difficult decision, the planned changes may have stalled or, at best, simply become another layer of procedures added to the existing structure.

At the same time, the district's top leadership protected department leaders whom it saw as critical to the transformation effort. A district official explained that,

> The superintendent has to provide a mantle and say, "These people are protected. You can't mess with my staff." And when the board says, "I don't like this person," the superintendent can't back down. Part of this is the superintendent getting out there and saying, "You stay here" to the board, and knowing how to work the board hour by hour.

In addition to actively managing his top HR personnel, Houston's super-intendent set the stage for transforming the department by forcefully communicating the need for change and providing a common language about the department's new identity. According to top HR officials, the superintendent sent a clear message throughout the HR department that administrators needed to do "whatever was necessary" to fix it. The basic message, according to one HR official, was,

> "Fix HR - do whatever it takes. We're willing to make a commitment to support you."… Efficiency and effectiveness were the constant message … [the superintendent said,] "You don't need all those people." We had 176 or something positions over here … we eliminated 76.

On one level, fixing HR in Houston simply meant finding "a better way to organize the organization to get work done." And yet, Houston's rethink-ing of HR was also informed by the district's broader reform strategies that emphasized performance, accountability, and decentralization. A new and improved HR was, in short, about more than just paying people efficiently. It was also a tool for supporting school leaders by, for example, giving them access to data that would help them do a better job managing their schools — access to information about job candidates, staffing reports, etc. As one district official explained, "if a principal is doing evaluations and they want to see what someone's leave has been to see how that's impacted their work, now they can go in and get a leave statement on the person." Whether investing in new information systems or restructuring the depart-ment, Houston's vision of HR under reform was both as a smooth part of the district's business processes and as a key information broker under reform.

The district's top leadership also provided a common language for talking about the speed and irreversibility of the reforms: change, they said, was a northbound train. As the district's director of business operations remembered, when dramatic changes were underway as part of the new information system "one of the things [the superintendent] said was, 'This northbound train has traveled so far that I have had the bridge behind us burned. There is no turning back.'" The HR director's use of the same metaphor was typical:

> Once the train takes off, you do not stop and pick up anybody who stayed down on the ground, because if they didn't get on the train with you, you don't have extra energy to expend picking them up. You get on that train and ask whoever wants to get on it, to get on it, and then let's go.

Top leaders in Houston even appeared to have sent a common message to key employees about both the drastic nature of the change and an invitation to join in something new. Slight variations on the following story turned up

in several interviews:

> **Interviewee:** *So the superintendent said to me, "We need to blow up HR. I want you to get out. Then blow it up."*

This recurring story marked the end of the "old" department and the interviewee's identification with what was to replace it.

Finally, Houston's leaders made a difference by assigning high-level officials to address its technology needs and providing them with adequate funding to get the job done. The superintendent's Major Projects Committee, staffed by upper level managers from departments across the central office, assigned one of its own, the district's Chief Financial Officer (CFO), as project champion. The CFO convened a steering committee composed of top people from several central office departments to oversee the implementation. The committee placed top people on individual project teams and kept them there as the system was implemented. According to one IT specialist, the CFO "bit the bullet and selected her best mid-management employees to do this [implementation]." The CFO chose a manager who "knew accounts payable and debits and credits, backwards and forwards," and teamed him with "a technical specialist who knew the product … and, between the two of them, they came up with the best solution." In addition, teams working on technology were "isolated from the regular group because [otherwise] you have the tendency to go back and ask them this question, that question, another question … the isolation kept us focused on our target."

Houston's leadership also bit the bullet on cost. "People that support technology always will get you initial funding, but when you get into a project," noted a Houston IT specialist, "it always costs more than you think." Houston's HR data management system alone required $15 million to install and has been costly to maintain and upgrade. One district administrator said that Houston's financial commitment required both vision and a degree of daring from the district's leadership:

> *[The superintendent] understood the power [of technology] and took a huge gamble to put that much money in something where there was no apparent gain in the warm fuzzy places that the community likes to see it. So again, it was about courage, being able to say, "I think this is the right thing, I don't care what anybody else says, I'm not gonna go molly coddle everybody else."*

Supporting technology involves "creating an organization where when [the new system] doesn't do everything you want it to do, you're willing to change the business process because it's overall beneficial to the business. This means leaders have to tell the central office, 'This is going to be tough. You're going to have to make this work with your existing staff,' [even] when everybody's screaming bloody murder."

Milwaukee

In contrast to Houston, there were few clear messages from the top in Milwaukee about what changes were needed in the HR department, or what was being demanded of HR personnel. None of the HR personnel, principals, or upper level managers interviewed for this study could explain why the HR department was being merged with the district's accountability department or what this would mean for personnel in either department. One district administrator offered a typical assessment when she said that although parts of the new structure had potential, its scope and lack of definition left people unsettled and worried about being overextended. "That is not the way people should work," she said "Flattening the organization is one thing. Collapsing people is another." At the time of our visit, unclear communication from top district leaders about the logic behind the structural change in Milwaukee's central office led to confusion and a cautious wait-and-see attitude among HR personnel. One wary district official said of the change, "Even if you were just brainstorming on your own, I don't think this is what you'd come up with." In Milwaukee, district leadership appeared to leave people's understanding of the reform's purpose largely to chance.

Where Houston's leaders had made forceful decisions about HR personnel, officials and staff described an environment in Milwaukee that was biased against change, especially with regard to the expectations held for HR personnel and the central office in general. A mid-level HR staffer said the district had not, "set a precedent as far as getting rid of people who aren't working."

> With your contracts you're getting raises regardless of your performance. And so why should you change? You're gonna keep getting your raises … if no one's saying anything to you, if no one's threatening your job then why should you change? If you can get away with it for that long—I think that's the mentality that's going on here.

A subtler take on the lack of change in the department's personnel came from a top district administrator:

> Our system is not open… and it's not just the system, it's the community. [People] need to stop being so parochial in their thinking. They think that the only people who can work here are from MPS. It is why change is so difficult to do. It's because [of the attitude:] we've always done it that way… People are too laden by the stories and the history of this place to be creative.

Summary

It would be a mistake to read these contrasts between Houston and Milwaukee as a case of "good" vs. "bad" leadership. Instead, it shows the impact of a history of leadership continuity and focus on the one hand, and a lack of continuity on the other.

Houston's school board had a consistent vision for the district since the creation of its *Beliefs and Visions* document in 1989. Subsequent board majorities continued championing the vision and hired a series of superintendents who bought into this vision. This district's long-standing reform strategy created a foundation, both in terms of vision and the political support that went with it, that allowed the superintendent to have a firm idea of how HR and other central office departments fit into district-wide reforms. Leadership continuity allowed Houston the time to fully implement its reforms, correct mistakes, and build on its successes.

In contrast, Milwaukee's leadership history is a story of interruption. Its school board and its superintendency have seen a range of both ideas and individuals over the last decade. In the words of one current school board member, "We've had a revolving door—the superintendents and school board members come and go." No Milwaukee superintendent since 1986 has lasted more than four years in the job.

The result has been uncertainty both about the district's direction and the role its HR department should play in it. As a board member observed,

> *I think the word "current"[in referring to the district's reform strategy] is probably appropriate because it has changed based on the makeup of the school board and who's superintendent at the time.*

With turnover in both the district and departmental leadership, it is perhaps unsurprising that HR reform in Milwaukee appears unsettled. Speaking about why past information technology investments were not widely supported in HR—people had held on to "their old processes"—the HR director explained:

> *The administration changes so much that people feel, "Well I've got to get an accurate report. I don't have time to rely on this new fangeld stuff when I've gotta get it out." So they know if they enter a database, that's information they put in, they remember it and so they felt more secure with that.*

San Diego's leadership story is in many ways somewhere in between Houston's and Milwaukee's. The district has pursued a consistent vision of reform under the same superintendent for five years that has greatly informed changes in its HR department. As one official explained, the changes being sought in HR were above all about aligning the department with the reform's idea that

"school sites and principals need, as much as possible, absolute control over the selection of the people they get to work at the school site." "We were told [by the superintendent] in the beginning that we're here to support principals and to stop being blockers," explained one HR staffer. At the same time, San Diego's school board is split over the district's direction and its teachers union has opposed much of the superintendent's reforms. Depending on the outcome of subsequent school board elections, San Diego may continue to enjoy leadership continuity; but it could just as easily enter an era of instability and backsliding.

In the end, Milwaukee's and Houston's fates are equally uncertain. Milwaukee may find stability with its latest superintendent and newly elected board. Houston's consensus might breakdown. Indeed, one Houston insider worried,

> *We've lost [key members] on the board who understood the whole thing and how to move your colleagues who weren't necessarily in sync with all of this, how to move them along. So it's touch and go a lot.*

Add to this media reports on hidden dropout rates and other controversy in Houston, and it is not out of the question that a very different picture could emerge there in the near future. In all three cases, the achievements and challenges described here are far from static.

Chapter 4   Implications

Houston's, Milwaukee's, and San Diego's experiences suggest that Robert Behn, management scholar at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, was correct when he advised public managers that getting results requires a combination of administration, leadership, and policy. In all three districts, the transformation of HR included administrative actions that affected structure, personnel, and technology. Just as clearly, the likelihood that these administrative actions would have an effect depended on leadership from department heads, superintendents, and school board members. In particular, leaders can help drive changes in the central office by:

- Grounding their improvement efforts in district-wide goals and strategy
- Ensuring that adequate investments in central office professionals' capacity accompany new organizational structures
- Supporting department leaders when they make difficult personnel decisions to increase HR capacity
- Committing long-term financial and human resources to information technology investments

This leaves a complicated, but incomplete, "necessary-but-not-sufficient" story about the transformation of district HR. A transformed HR office requires substantial administrative change, but administrative changes without intervention and guidance from leadership may have little staying power or coherence. Just as likely, a leader's vision and goals will have trouble gaining traction without an aligned administrative system. And, though the study does not explore staffing policies themselves, innovations like decentralized staffing may be of little consequence without administrative support or leadership commitment.[21] To sum up, each of the elements—structure, personnel, technology, and leadership—may be necessary for a successful transformation of HR, but none alone is sufficient.

Of course, the factors highlighted here—with regard to administration and leadership but also beyond them—are not the only variables in the equation. Some important elements (e.g., union/labor environment, budgets) are only touched on while others have been ignored entirely, either because they were beyond the scope of the study or beyond the influence of district leaders (e.g., community politics, macro economic factors, and state educa-

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[21] For more on hiring policies and how they affect hiring decisions see Levin and Quinn, 2003.

tion policy). Having said that, as the discussion below suggests, the interplay between administration and leadership offers useful points of reference for leaders who are thinking deliberately about remaking their HR departments into more responsive units.

Marshaling HR as an Ally

To make the HR function more useful and relevant, superintendents and school boards must first recognize that central office departments play an important part in implementing district-wide reform. Once that is acknowledged, district officials can begin to outline the role central office departments need to play for reform to be successful. For the HR departments presented here, this meant translating broad concepts of principal empowerment into actual HR practice — saying what it means to move from command and control to consultation and facilitation, and determining how district leaders will know whether intended changes have been made. Shifts of this magnitude require fundamental change in the operation of central HR office. The move to HR generalists, the enhanced HR status in the district, the infusion of new HR expertise, and the advent of integrated information systems are all steps with potential to reorient the way HR approaches its role.

None of these changes, however, automatically yields results. Department managers, superintendents, and school boards have to motivate and reinforce these administrative changes if they are to have the desired effect:

- To contribute to district-wide goals and strategy, HR reform needs to be grounded in the district's broader reform agenda. Leaders who want their HR departments to be more responsive have to set the stage by being clear and consistent about their district's broader goals and direction and HR place in them. Tactical administrative reforms without big-picture leadership may have little staying power or may simply make old processes more efficient. And yet, vision and mission without administrative processes may stall as hollow exhortation.
- New organizational structures require investments in HR professionals. Changing organizational structure without investing in the capacity of the people working under that structure is a losing proposition. Whether investments in capacity come via training, new hires, or outside consultants, having the right talent is a key element in the possibility of a new structure. One of the most important ideas suggested by these three districts is that school districts generally need department heads with both HR expertise and leadership ability — without this, a new and improved HR function is unlikely.
- Investments in HR professionals require a commitment from district leadership and managerial courage. Attempts to alter capacity in personnel — again whether through new training,

new hires, layoffs, or consultants — requires support and at times intervention from the highest levels in the district. Making tough decisions about what it will take to change an organization is never easy. As more than one respondent mentioned, the problem in changing HR is less about knowing what to do, and more about having the confidence to do it. Or, as a Houston official quipped, you need leaders who are "willing to call the baby ugly." If new structures require tough personnel decisions, superintendents and boards need to support HR directors in elevating and restructuring their staff.

- Successful investments in technology are long-term propositions that require money and commitment. It is clear that investments in technology are an important part of decentralizing HR responsibility to schools and making central office HR more responsive. Technology can be a waste of time and money, however, if it is done on the cheap and without sustained commitment and effort. Superintendents and school boards need to recognize that technology investments are not single-shot events — they are open ended and run against the time-horizon incentives of key players in the district. Investing in administrative technology is not easy; its connection to students, after all, is difficult to explain and politically hard to sell. But, as one official explained, technology is needed in order to make an organization as large as a district work: "It keeps you from getting mired in all of the [----] that most large urban districts do that just detracts from your ability to do the real stuff."

In the three districts we studied, HR reforms were not automatic—they required deliberate actions and intervention on the part of leaders and managers. Of course, how district leaders approach HR reform will depend on local context. If, like Houston, a district already has leadership continuity and is committed to transforming HR or other central offices, its leaders' biggest challenge is sustaining that level of commitment and using it proactively to reevaluate and rethink the management of its central services. In districts that lack leadership continuity and a district-wide reform vision, leaders would be better off attending to those fundamental areas first, rather than attempting to lead change from within a single central office department.

Most school districts, of course, will probably fall somewhere between these two scenarios. For leaders in those districts, the challenge is to develop and communicate a vision of how HR can contribute to a district's goals and to guide that vision through the potential resistance and distraction of district politics.[22]

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[22] On the demands of organizational change, for example, see John P. Kotter *Leading Change* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1996).

Regardless of the degree of leadership stability a district has, other local conditions will affect the shape of HR transformation efforts. Collective bargaining agreements in San Diego and Milwaukee created imperatives and constraints that were not present in Houston. Whether or not a district has flush or tight budgets also has clear implications for HR transformation efforts, especially when it comes to investments in new technology. While local leadership matters, a host of other issues matter as well.

Two lines of further inquiry would help clarify the issues raised here and provide more specific direction. First, an investigation into the relationship between district leadership and central office administration (in HR as well as other central office functions) could help clarify the skills leaders and managers need to navigate the difficult waters of bureaucratic school reform. Second, an investigation into the relationship between HR management practices and teacher quality could help identify those processes and structures that help districts attract and place quality teachers. Far too little is known about how HR systems, practices, and policy affect teacher quality.

Despite the study's limitations, it seems clear that whether or not HR is able to transform itself into a new organization has as much to do with the quality of leadership at the top of the district as with the management of the department. When district leaders recognize HR's importance, and think deliberately about ways to reorient their central bureaucracies to be more effective and to focus on schools' needs, they may be in a position to marshal HR as an ally that supports, rather than hinders, efforts to improve schools and teachers for all students. Neglect, unfortunately, may be far from benign. Even if a superintendent thinks her HR department is run competently, she should not assume that its operation is aligned with district-wide reform goals. Competence and professionalism in HR are important. But absent a sense of HR's role in reform and constant attention from a superintendent, competent HR departments may end up following their own pre-existing standards. In particular, these districts' experiences suggest that providing better support for school leaders includes more than simply increased efficiency; it includes rethinking roles and structures as well.

Appendices

Methods

In the fall of 2002 and spring of 2003, researchers from the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington visited three districts that were working to improve their HR departments: Houston Independent School District, Milwaukee Public Schools, and San Diego City Schools. The research team spent three days in each district and collected in-depth information via semi-structured qualitative interviews. Interviews generally lasted between 1 - 1 ½ hours. The following table shows the types of interview respondents.

Site Visit		**Houston** February 2003	**Milwaukee** February 2003	**San Diego** December 2002	**TOTAL**
	Executive leadership	3	2	1	6
	HR personnel	10	6	5	21
Types of Interview Respondents	**Principals**	2	3	3	8
	Teachers	0	7	2	9
	Teachers union	0	1	0	1
	IT personnel	3	0	1	4
TOTAL		18	19	12	49

Interview Guide

Below is the interview guide used with HR personnel. Interview guides for superintendents, principals, and teachers followed the same topics using different wording where needed.

1. Begin by telling us about your job. We're interested in the main tasks you do during the workday/workweek. Is there one critical task that you perform?
    a. Does it change?
    b. What happens if you don't do this?
    c. Who does it serve?
    d. What data are involved?

2. What is your sense of the larger reforms going on in the district? How would you describe the major reform(s)? How do you see the HR department fitting into the larger reforms underway in the district?
   a. Are any of the reforms specifically aimed at the HR department?
   b. How did you learn about the reform/change (e.g., formal/informal)?

3. What do you see as the department's primary goal with regard to the reform? Is this different from the past?

4. How has your (personal) work changed since the reform?
   a. Is the department looking for different types of teaching and principal candidates?
   b. Do you have more control over how you do your job?
   c. Have you received any new training or technology?
   d. Have there been any changes in HR budget or staffing?
   e. Have there been any changes in how you are (personally) held accountable for your work? (For what? To whom? With what consequences?)

5. Who do you see as your primary customers (who do you do most of your work for)? Who waits for your service and what do they do with it once they get it? Prompts:

   > Principals
   > Current & new teachers
   > Job candidates
   > HR staff
   > Central office department
   > Superintendent
   > School Board
   > Union

   a. How do these groups communicate with you/HR?
   b. Are their expectations for your work realistic? (Satisfaction?)
   c. Is there anything about this that is different since the reform?

6. Given the superintendent's expectations, how well do you think the department is doing?

7. What are the biggest challenges associated with reform from the HR perspective? Are there other groups or departments that help or hinder your work?

8. Are there factors outside of the district that affect your work?

9. Is the HR staff on board with the district reform? How have they responded? (For HR Director: What can you do if they don't agree or don't want to contribute to the effort?)

10. What should district leaders know about the reform and its implementation from the HR perspective that they do not know right now?

11. What is your opinion about the direction taken by the district's reforms?

12. What would you change about the way things are done in this department or the district as a whole to better support the reform effort?

13. How and when did you come to work for this department? How did you get into HR? Is there anything in your past experience that was particularly helpful in preparation for the job?

The Three Districts in 2001-02

For a sense of relative scale, the following table shows full-time equivalents (FTEs) and budgets of the three HR departments and districts for the 2001-2002 school year.

	Houston	Milwaukee	San Diego
Total Students*	210,950	97,762	141,599
Classroom Teachers (FTE)*	12,097	5,980	7,501
HR Department (FTE)**	104	55	90.5
Ratio of HR (FTE) to Teachers (FTE)	1:116	1:109	1:83
Total HR Expenditures 2001-02**	$8,084,312	$4,686,614	$15,764,619
Total Expenditures*	$1,543,034,000	$1,008,450,000	$1,148,161,000
HR expenditures as percentage of district expenditures	.52%	.46%	1.37%

* Source: Common Core of Data public school district data for the 2001-02 school year, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

** Source: correspondence with district HR and budget personnel. Cross-district budget comparisons are problematic because of differences in district accounting and, more importantly, in the duties assigned to HR in each district.

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